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THE IMPERILED MAN WAS DASHING CHARLIE! WOULD THE BUGLE CALL TO ARMS SAVE HIM?

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DASHING CHARLIE'S DOUBLE;

OR,

THE OLD MINER'S LEGACY.

A Romance of the Mountain Marauders
of New Mexico.

BY COLONEL PRENTISS INGRAHAM.

CHAPTER I.

THE VOLUNTEER.

"My young pard, I am dying."

"Not so bad as that, I guess, old friend."

"Yes, I feel the sands of life slipping from my grasp, and when a man's time has come to look down into his open grave, he should think of what he has left undone in this world, of some pleasure he might have brought to others, some act of atonement he can make for deeds done in the past."

"Say, old friend, you are ill and blue; but cheer up, for I have seen the shadow of death hover over many a man, and yet he came out into the sunlight of life again; so cheer up, and don't think of making your last camp for many a long day to come."

"You talk, young pard, as one standing on the threshold of life, while I stand on the threshold of death and look back over a long trail marked with many a misfortune, many a sorrow, and here and there a pain that will not slip out of my memory."

"I feel that the future is for me but a few more days, perhaps weeks, and I long to see one who would clasp my hands when the life-cords snap and see me put to rest, one whom I can ask to forgive me a great wrong done him in the long ago, and to forget, while I can atone by my last act."

"Can I bring that one to you, old man?"

"My God! could you only do so, then my heart would indeed be glad!"

"I will do it."

"Ah! how rash the promise you make! You know not what it is you assume to do."

"I have promised and no man can say that Charlie Emmett ever broke his word or went back on a pard in distress."

"It is what I have always heard of you, my young friend; but let me tell you that between the one I would have you seek and this wild land in which I am now dying, lies many a long, weary ride where danger lurks continually in ambush."

"I am a plainsman, old man."

"I know it, for who has not heard of Dashing Charlie, the venturesome scout and trusty guide?"

"But, Charlie, I sent six months ago, when I felt my health failing me, a man true as steel, to go on this errand for me, and only one week after they found him dead and scalped on the trail."

"I know; it was poor Bill Baldy."

"Yes, and an old plainsman he was, brave, wary and tireless, and yet he failed and was lost."

"Some two months after I offered a snug sum to another guide to go on this errand for me, and he is now a captive among the Comanches."

"I got yet another trusty man to go, and Muello, the Mexican, and his band put him to death."

"That was three."

"Yes; but the list does not end there."

"More yet!" exclaimed Emmett in surprise.

"Yes, three more, for the trail I put them to follow has been fatal so far to six men."

"It is said that there is luck in odd numbers, so I volunteer as Number Seven, pard!"

"Do you dare do it?" was the eager reply.

"I do dare, certainly. That is my way, you see!" and Charlie smiled.

"I have told you the terrible risks to run."

"I perfectly understand, pard."

"It has been a fatal trail to five men, perhaps to six, for the sixth is a prisoner to the Comanches."

"But, yet more: it is known that I wish to send for some one to come here and see me before I die."

"It is also known that I have struck it rich here in New Mexico, and have hidden away a handsome fortune in yellow metal."

"I have heard as much."

"Now, if I die, some men that I know hope to get my hard-earned fortune, either by forcing the secret from me ere I die, or by finding it after I am dead."

"They must be disappointed; that is all."

"And you volunteer to thwart them?"

"I do, just that, pard!"

"Well, I have heard much of you, Dashing Charlie, and they tell wonderful stories of how you, when a boy of thirteen, tracked your uncle, a plainsman, from your home, where he went on a visit to your people, to the fur coun-

try far up the Missouri River, and that you did it alone, passing through dangers most deadly and hardships that a man would have shrunk from."

"I heard it all, and more: how you have rendered distinguished service as guide, scout and Indian-fighter."

"Now, what brought you here to the mines of New Mexico I do not know; but it was kind of you to offer to take care of me in your turn along with the other boys, and plucky of you to volunteer to do what other men have lost their lives in attempting."

"Do you still mean what you said?"

"I do."

"And will make the venture?"

"Why not?"

"Well, just because no man in the mines is willing to take the chances—that is why."

"I'll take all chances."

"Against Indians, outlaws, and all else?"

"Against all that I may have to face, be it a cohort of imps."

"I have offered any man a horse, saddle, bridle and border outfit complete, with five hundred dollars in cash if he will do the work."

"I'll go for the money alone, for I have a complete outfit."

"Then I'll make it one thousand in cash."

"Good! what am I to do?"

"When can you start?"

"Within five minutes."

"That is business; so I too will lose no time in telling you just what I wish you to do."

"Come nearer, for I do not care to speak aloud, as who knows but that some one is watching us now?"

"I'll see."

With this, the man known as Dashing Charlie stepped quickly to the door of the cabin, threw it open, and sprung out into the darkness.

Instantly followed the sound of tramping feet, a loud cry to halt, and a shot.

A moment after Dashing Charlie returned:

"There was some one there?"

"Yes, with his ear to the crack at the window."

"You killed him?"

"Oh, no, I did not care to do that; but as he would not halt I winged him, or in other words broke his arm, for the moonlight revealed him distinctly."

"Is he there?"

"Oh, no, he kept on running."

"Then how do you know you broke his arm?"

"I fired at his left arm and I never miss," was the confident reply of the scout.

CHAPTER II.

DASHING CHARLIE.

For some minutes after the young man returned to the cabin, and made the remark that he never missed his aim, the two sat together in silence.

The scene was a log cabin situated in a valley of New Mexico, in the mining country.

It was under the shadow of a mountain, and its back stood against a cliff in a thicket of pines, while a swiftly-flowing stream wound along a few paces in front of the door.

It was a stoutly-built, large cabin, with several bunk beds in it, a table, some chairs, shelves, and a rude clothes press, evidently home-made.

A large fireplace was in the rear and a fire of logs was blazing upon the hearth, giving the only light within, for it was night.

The two occupants of the cabin were seated before the hearth, one in a rustic easy-chair, the other upon a bench.

The former was a man of fine presence, with long iron-gray beard, and hair that hung in waving waves down to his belt.

He was dressed in the woolen shirt, buckskin leggings and top-boots of a miner, while about his waist was his belt of arms.

His face was a noble one, and his physique had been that of an athlete, though it was emaciated now from long illness.

The other occupant of the cabin stood six feet high, was slender, upright as a soldier and possessed good broad shoulders, a massive chest and muscular limbs.

His eyes were blue and piercing, his hair almost golden and worn long, while his face was beardless, bronzed to the hue of a Mexican's, and bold, fearless and determined.

He was dressed in buckskin leggings, top-boots, a silk hunting-shirt, and a jacket of velvet, while upon his head was a gray sombrero with broad brim and encircled by a band made of silver quarters.

He had in his belt two revolvers and a bowie, wore a red-silk sash with knotted ends, and swung to a hook upon his left shoulder was a coiled lariat.

The old man was known as Matt Markham, the Miner of Good Luck Canyon, and for years he had been steadily digging out gold from the mines and hiding it away, it was said, until he had amassed a large fortune.

He had been dogged—watched by day and night—and his cabin attacked by outlaws, all to discover his gold or force from him the secret of where it was hidden; but all to no avail, for so surely as any man had alone started to ambush

the old miner, that certain was Matt Markham to call in his neighbors to attend a burial at his expense, for, as he was wont to say also, he furnished the remains.

If attacked by a band of outlaws, he stood them off until help came at the sound of the firing, and thus it went on until the old miner was dreaded as a terror by all evil-doers.

But his had been a wild, adventurous life, and he had been severely wounded, all of which went toward undermining his health, until at last he broke almost down, and it was said that he had consumption.

But the old miner held on to life most bravely, and not until he became very weak did he yield and allow one of the men from the neighboring mines to stay with him at night in his lonely cabin.

One night a young man had volunteered for the duty who had not been long in the mines.

He was known as an Indian-fighter and guide from the Northern country, and had come to New Mexico, he said, to try his hand at gold-digging.

He had given his name as Charlie Emmett, and he was scarcely twenty-one years of age; but it soon leaked out that he had won fame on the Northern trails as Dashing Charlie, and many a strange and wonderful story was told of the desperate life he had led, his daring deeds and escapes from death, which caused men to say that he bore a charmed life.

He had lived among the red-skins for years, as a captive, and fought them afterward with a courage that was never daunted, and until he became known as the "White Scalp-taker of the Plains."

As guide and scout he had led military expeditions into the furthest recesses and most secret haunts of the Sioux, and it was said that he had a frame of iron, an eye that never quailed and a nerve that nothing could shake, while as a horseman he had no superior, and as a shot his aim was most sure and sudden death to a foe.

Such was the man who had, while seated in camp one night when the discussion had come up as to who was to go up and care for Matt Markham for the next two days and nights, volunteered to become nurse himself and go up at once and relieve the man then on duty there.

Often before, in passing his cabin, Dashing Charlie had left him some game, or a fine string of fish, and in other ways remembered him, so that when he appeared at the lonely cabin, situated far from any of the others in the valley, Matt Markham had given him a kindly welcome, and the two had quickly talked themselves into a friendship for each other that was sincere with both of them.

Thus it was, the first night of his stay there, occurred the conversation that opens this story, when Dashing Charlie volunteered to go upon a trail for Matt Markham which had already proven fatal to those who had started upon it before.

CHAPTER III.

THE MINER'S STORY.

THE old miner's face brightened with the thought that he was to have another chance to send some one on the mission he had before met with such ill-fortune in attempting through others.

He seemed to feel, as he looked into the face of Dashing Charlie Emmett, that he beheld one who would dare every danger and conquer success.

"Well, my young friend, I have something to tell you which will cause me to unfold a bit of past history.

"I feel that I can trust you, and I have that to say that brings up to me memories I have suffered greatly from recalling.

"Will you listen to my story, friend Charlie?"

"To all you care to make known to me, Pard Markham."

The old miner was silent for some minutes, as though dwelling in the far bygone.

But at last he said:

"Let me say to you that I came of a good family in Virginia, and there was never a shadow crossed the threshold of our home until a woman's love came between my brother and myself.

"We, Dick Markham and I, were attending school together, and we were as devoted to each other as brothers could well be.

"I was the older and he looked up to me in many things.

"But at last came between us the one who parted our lives.

"It was at a grand old country home where a party of a score of youths and maidens had been invited to spend the Christmas days of enjoyment.

"The mansion had some fifty rooms in it, was situated in the midst of a beautiful country and surrounded by thousands of acres.

"Rides, drives, hunts and fishing excursions formed the amusement without, with games, dancing and flirting within doors.

"The heiress to this home was a young girl of sixteen, as lovely as maiden could well be, and

though there were many others there, she was the belle, the beauty, and won all the youths to love her.

"My brother, Dick Markham, and myself fell desperately in love with her, but she treated us both alike, and yet we became rivals, and for the first time in our lives a shadow came between us."

"The night after Christmas we were all awoken by the loud cries of fire, ringing through the house.

"The mansion was in flames and burning like a barn, for it was a wooden structure.

"The young men occupied one wing of the house and escaped readily, but the young girls were on the floor above and their rooms were scattered.

"When we had all met on the grounds it was discovered that Beatrice Gibbs was not among the others.

"Her room was at the extreme end of the south wing, a cozy little chamber which she occupied alone.

"At once the cry arose that she was still sleeping and so must perish, and away darted my brother into the burning mansion, unheeding the cries of warning to recall him.

"I also started, but the hot flames drove me back and nearly suffocated me, for I had to be dragged away by others.

"I must have become unconscious, for I remembered nothing until a loud shout arose, and there I beheld Dick upon the roof, having passed up through a trap, and in his arms he held Beatrice Gibbs.

"He made his way along on the dizzy height to the end of the wing, where ladders were placed by willing hands, and down it he came to the ground in safety.

"Beatrice was unhurt, but poor Dick had passed through flames to reach her and his face and hands were badly burned, and many supposed that he would not live.

"But he did live, and more, Beatrice became his promised wife, all scarred though his face and hands were.

"I became almost a madman when I knew that I had lost the maiden I loved, and the feelings of Cain filled my heart.

"I brooded over my lost love and my brother's fortune until I hated him with all the venom of my nature, and at last it came to me to get rid of him, for if he was dead Beatrice would love me.

"The opportunity offered at last in a shooting tournament, when, as though by accident, my rifle went off and the bullet pierced the breast of my brother.

"But many present swore that it was not an accident, that I had done it on purpose, and as it was known that I never spoke to Dick now, that we were rivals, I was arrested and thrown into jail.

"My brother, it was said, could not live, and the people were so infuriated against me, that they formed a plot to take me by night from the jail and hang me.

"The jailer was warned by Beatrice and two men who rode up and told him to intrust me to their keeping, and so prevent my being hanged by a mob.

"In his alarm he did so, and once free of the town Beatrice said to me:

"Matthew Markham, you are a free man.

"It is your brother's wish and mine, so go your way.

"Here is a horse for you, and money sent by your father, so fly for your life, for you will be hanged by the mob, and if not, should Dick die justice will bring you to the gallows.

"Now go!"

"Young pard, I did fly for my life, and made my escape.

"I became a wanderer, but though my brother got well after long months of suffering between life and death, I dared not return to Virginia.

"I led a wild life, for I heard that he had married Beatrice Gibbs, and that made a desperate man of me.

"At last I had news from home, of how my brother had lost his fortune, by indorsing notes for others, and with all he could save from the wreck had gone to Texas and turned ranchero.

"A child, a little girl, blessed the union of the two, and Beatrice at last took ill and died.

"But before her strength left her she wrote me a letter, which was sealed and sent to my address, which I had given at Fort Kearney.

"This letter contained that which cut deep into my heart.

"It told me that she had loved me, not my brother Richard, but when he became disfigured for life through saving her from the burning mansion, she had determined, from gratitude, to marry him.

"She begged me to reform my evil life, to seek my brother and I would find a welcome, and to love her child as once I had told her I loved her.

"Such was the letter—I have it here—but I did not obey its summons then, and that was ten years ago.

"Now, with the hand of death upon me, I have determined upon what I shall do. It is a duty I owe to the living and to the dead, and

you, my young friend, I feel will be the instrument to enable me to carry out my resolve, for you have promised, have you not?"

"I have, and there is my hand upon it, old man, that I will keep my pledge, be the dangers to face what they may" and Dashing Charlie extended his hand to the old miner in a way that proved that death alone should cause him to break his pledge.

CHAPTER IV.

THE MISSION.

THE manner of Dashing Charlie inspired old Miner Markham with confidence.

He was not really an old man, having just crossed the threshold of fifty years; but his dissipated early life, the hardships and sufferings he had known, had aged him before his proper time.

Dashing Charlie had listened to the old man's confession of his wrong-doing with a great deal of interest.

If he had sinned, he had suffered deeply for it.

Now, if he could aid him to atone for the past, he would gladly do so.

"There is one thing I forgot to refer to, in speaking of the love of my brother and myself for beautiful Beatrice Gibbs, and that is of the cause of the burning of the mansion.

"It was not known then how it caught on fire; but afterward, in a drunken carousal, another lover of Beatrice, a youth who hated my brother and myself, hinted that he could tell who set it on fire.

"In fact, he hinted that he had done so, hoping to destroy her for the refusal of his love, and perhaps my brother and myself also.

"As there was an old servant and a negro boy burned to death in the house, this made him a murderer, and he would have been severely dealt with had not his mother gotten word of his confession while under the influence of liquor and made him seek safety in flight.

"Now, his name was Robert Brackett, and I am convinced that the man in these mines, a drunken miner known as Racket Rob, is none other than the youth I then knew, and who set Bainbridge Hall on fire.

"This man, Racket Rob, has followed me closely for years, or has seemed to do so, and is one who is most anxious regarding the treasure I have hidden away, while I believe that several times he has been the unknown foe who has attempted my life.

"In fact, Dashing Charlie, keep your eye on him, for I do not believe he is the drunkard all suppose him to be, and, really, he may play the part of a drunken sot for a purpose."

"I know him, and will keep an eye upon him, old pard; but now, what is it you wish me to do?" said Dashing Charlie.

"Just this: go to Texas, to the ranch of my brother Dick, and tell him that I am dying and wish him to come to me.

"Tell him that I have amassed a very large fortune in gold, and every ounce of it is hidden away in the mountains here, in a spot known only to myself.

"That fortune I intend to give to his daughter, to the child of Beatrice, and he must come here and get it—must come to be with me in my dying hours, to show that he has forgiven me all the past, and will clasp my hand in brotherly love once more.

"The others whom I have sent, and who have gone to their doom, have not known my secret as you do, for I have not told it to them.

"They have only been told to go and bring my brother here to see me die.

"You know the truth as it is, and you can so tell him.

"You can tell him that I have confessed all to you, and that Beatrice is to be my heiress, and it will be to a fortune well worth having.

"When my brother comes I will tell him all, and have you guide him to the place."

"But should you die before he arrives, for it is well to look death squarely in the face?" said Dashing Charlie.

"Yes, and I thank you for the suggestion.

"Yes, that must be faced squarely, and so I will tell you that I have here a secret hiding-place in this cabin—it is the flat rock in the hearth there upon which the fire is built.

"Beneath it, a couple of feet in depth, is another rock, and it covers a small hole in which you will find a map of the hiding-place of my treasure, and all particulars.

"Do you understand?"

"Perfectly, old pard."

"Well, you bring my brother Dick here to me and all will be well."

"But should I have passed away then you know where to find the map and papers giving a full description of all my riches and where to find the gold."

"Yes."

"It is my wish, should I still be alive when you return, that you remain with me until the end comes.

"Will you do this?"

"I will."

"You shall not regret it, my young friend, I assure you."

"I will remain unto the end."

"And I desire to be buried here in the center of my cabin."

"In your cabin?"

"Yes, take up eight feet by four of the board flooring, just in the center of the cabin, and there dig my grave."

"I wish it dug just six feet deep, and when it is filled in, smooth over the dirt and set my cabin on fire, with my tools, furniture, and all there is in it."

"This is a strange request, old pard."

"It is what I desire nevertheless, and when a heap of ashes alone marks the spot where I have lived, died and been buried, my soul will rest in peace."

"It shall be as you say, sir."

"I feel that you will carry out my instructions fully, Dashing Charlie."

"I certainly will, sir."

"Nothing must stand in the way of my last wishes being fulfilled."

"But now you know what you are to do?"

"Everything."

"And will start to-night?"

"I do not wish to have you alone here."

"It will be better, for you can get a couple of days' start before your intention is known, hence you can not hit those who would prevent."

"True, and as I have my horse and outfit here with me, I can leave at once, and until some one comes up from the camp to relieve me, it will not be known that I have gone."

"That will be the way to win success, for then no one can ambush you," responded the old miner, and half an hour after he wrung the young scout's hand hard as he bade him farewell and started upon his dangerous mission.

CHAPTER V.

DASHING CHARLIE TAKES THE TRAIL.

THERE was no better mounted or armed man on the border than was Dashing Charlie Emmett.

As he expressed it: "He went loaded for any game that might come across his path."

His horse was a roan stallion, vicious as Satan to all except his master, fleet as a deer and untiring as a hound.

His saddle was a light Mexican tree without heavy trappings and stirrups, but it had saddle-pockets that were capacious, one for clothing, the other for food.

On one side of the saddle-horn was a revolver holster, upon the other an ammunition-case.

Then he had an oil-skin coat and leggings, a large blanket of the same water-proof material, and a roll containing two woven Mexican blankets, so that he was ready for any weather and a long journey at a moment's notice.

He carried a short repeating-rifle, good at close and long range, his belt revolvers, the large navy-six in the saddle-holster, a bowie-knife, hatchet, a lariat and bow and arrows, all of which he could use dexterously.

When on a long march, and not in a hurry, Dashing Charlie would walk nearly all day or night, so as to spare his horse, so that when he needed good service from the animal he got it.

When he went to the cabin of Matt Markham to be his nurse for a couple of days, he had gone ready for a trail, if called upon, excepting for food, and this the miner readily supplied.

Leaving the cabin he had walked down Good Luck Canyon, his horse following, until he came to a trail branching off into the mountains toward the north.

Here he sought a good hiding-place for his horse, and staking him out, returned on foot toward the mining-camps some five miles from Markham's cabin.

There was one cabin perched upon the mountain-side to itself, for it was an eighth of a mile from the cluster of camps, and toward this went Dashing Charlie.

He did not approach it by the trail, but flanked it, and came from the rear.

A light glimmered through certain crevices in the logs, and gazing through one of them he beheld the interior of the cabin.

Two men were there, and one was groaning, as though in great pain, while the other was busy with bandages dressing a wound in the arm of the sufferer.

Dropping down from his place of observation high up in the cabin wall, Dashing Charlie walked around to the door and approached with heavy tread, while he called out as he did so:

"Ho, pard, are you at home?"

"Who is there?" asked a voice from within.

"Charlie Emmett, pard, and I want to see you."

The door cautiously opened and Charlie stepped within.

The wounded man was seated at the table, his arm half bound up, and the other had opened the door.

The latter was a man known in the mining-camps as "Old Rhubarb," though he signed himself as Zekiel Quick, M. D.

He had gone into the mines to dig for gold, but being a physician found that it paid better to practice his profession, for there was hardly a day that he did not have a dozen wounded patients to look after, not to speak of the cases of illness he had to doctor.

"Ho, Racket Rob, you seem to be in bad shape, and I am sorry, for I called to ask you to look after old Miner Markham for me for a couple of days, as I am going on a hunt."

The man at first seemed very nervous, when the scout entered, but his words at once quieted him, and he replied:

"Waal, Dashing Charlie, I am in bad shape I admits, for I dropped my revolver and it went off, the bullet tearing through my arm, don't ever see."

"It wasn't fer that I'd be glad ter give ther old man a help of my servises."

"Yes, but you need a nurse yourself, and my advice is for you to keep quiet, for that wound is an ugly one, isn't it, Doc?"

"It is, Dashing Charlie, if inflammation and fever follows; but otherwise it will be all right in a few weeks."

"Well, good-night, pard, and, Rob, I'll find someone in the camps to take my place with the old man."

With this Dashing Charlie left the cabin, but not to take the trail down to the camps, as he had intimated.

Instead, he went around the camps toward the spot where he had left his horse, while he muttered to himself after leaving the cabin:

"Just as I supposed from what old Markham told me, that it was Racket Rob who was snooping around."

"Well, I guess he'll be more careful next time."

"Dropped his revolver, did he?"

"Well, I suppose he did, if he had it in his hand when my bullet struck him."

"I must keep an eye on that same Racket Rob."

He found his horse just as he had left him, and saddling up mounted and rode away on a trail leading northward.

But the first stream he came to he turned into it, and fording down the current held to the water for nearly an hour, when he rode out and started down a valley holding northward.

This course he held until dawn, when he went into camp with the remark:

"Now, Comanche, we will go into camp for a few hours' rest and breakfast, and if your namesakes the Comanches capture us, or Muello, the Mexican, catches us, I will be more than surprised, for we are not out to be killed or taken, are we, old fellow?"

The horse shook his head knowingly, and soon after was feeding contentedly while the scout slept the sleep of the just.

CHAPTER VI.

A CHASE FOR LIFE.

THE sun was nearing the horizon some days after the departure of Dashing Charlie from the cabin of Matt Markham, the Miner, and always fell upon a pleasant prairie home situated in the Lone Star State.

The house was built of logs, as were also the spacious outbuildings near it, yet there was an air of comfort and contentment upon all that the most luxurious palace could not possess.

It was a perfect prairie home, situated upon the banks of a swiftly-flowing stream and in a park of fine old oak trees.

The prairie across the stream was dotted with hundreds of cattle, a fine herd of horses, with a guard of a score of cowboys grouped here and there as herds and driving in their charges nearer home for the night.

Seated upon the piazza, watching the scene with considerable interest, though it was by no means new to them, were two persons.

One was a man of forty-five or fifty, with a fine physique and clad in the garb of a Texas ranchero.

His face was badly scarred as were also his neck and hands, yet withal he was a noble-looking specimen of manhood, one with a face in which there was much of kindness and gentleness.

Seated near him was a young girl of sixteen perhaps, possessing the same deep-blue eyes of the man, the same golden hair, and in spite of his scarred face, the resemblance between them showed that kindred blood flowed in their veins.

She wore a buckskin skirt fringed and beaded, a pretty silk blouse waist and a sombrero encircled by a gold cord.

A silk sash was about her waist, tiny boots upon her feet, and in her hand she held a riding-whip, for she had dismounted but a few moments before from her horse, which a negro had led around to the stables.

"You say that you saw Indian trails over on the Blue Creek bottom, Beatrice?" said her father, after the maiden had given him a description of her ride.

"Yes, father, for they were not the trails of stray ponies, though the hoofs were unshod."

"Then, too, I noticed moccasin-tracks in the soft ground in several places."

"I know that you are a good trailer, Beatrice, but I hardly think the red-skins would venture so near us, after the last reception we gave them."

"I am sure I cannot be mistaken, father."

"Well, I will send Mustang Walter and half

of his men on a scout at once in that direction, so call them in, please."

The maiden arose at this request, revealing a form perfect in outline and very graceful, and entering the broad hall of the cabin, soon reappeared, bearing in her hand a silver cornet.

Walking to the end of the piazza overlooking the stream and the prairie beyond, she placed the instrument to her lips and at once began to blow certain bugle-calls, the notes ringing out clear, loud and piercing, so as to be heard a couple of miles away in the stillness of the evening.

Instantly there was a movement among the cowboys on the prairie, and while half of them formed in line to drive the cattle in to the bend of the river, a safe pasture for the night, the others came on at a run toward the house.

Across a rustic bridge they thundered, for the stream was a deep one with steep banks, and thence on through the gate into the grounds, where they halted before the piazza, doffing their broad sombreros politely to Beatrice Markham as they halted with the regularity of soldiers.

They were a fearless, dashing lot of young men, superb riders, well mounted and thoroughly armed.

Their leader was tall, broad-shouldered and a handsome, fearless-faced fellow, who had won fame on the Texas border as a deadly foe and friend as true as steel.

"Well, Miss Beatrice, here we are to obey your call," he said, in a free-and-easy way natural to him.

"Mustang Walter, my daughter has just come in from a ride over on Blue Creek, and she reports seeing Indian traces there, so it would be well to take a scout over in that direction, I think."

"Certainly, sir, for Miss Beatrice is not often mistaken, though I certainly did not expect any reds to venture this near to us."

"We will go at once, and—"

"Oh, father! see, there!" suddenly broke in Beatrice, and she pointed far away out over the prairie.

All gazed at once in the direction indicated and beheld a horseman coming toward the ranch at full speed.

He had ridden out of the clump of timber, and behind him were half a hundred red-skins in full pursuit.

The horseman halted as they looked, dismounted and threw his rifle to his shoulder.

The puffs of smoke were seen as they went from the muzzle of the repeating-rifle, and three shots were fired.

A yell broke from the group of cowboys as they saw a warrior fall from his horse, while two ponies went down, hurling their riders heavily to the ground.

A shower of arrows followed, and the horseman was seen to leap into his saddle, and ride again with all speed toward the ranch.

"Come, pard! there is game for us!" cried Mustang Walter, and the cowboys dashed away from in front of the piazza, while Mr. Markham cried to his daughter:

"Quick, my child, call in the other men with your bugle! Sound the alarm, for that is a chase for life that brave fellow is having, and those Indians we see have others near to aid them, I am sure."

And loud and pleading rung the notes of Beatrice Markham's bugle in answer to her father's urgent request, for she too realized the danger of the flying horseman, as well as their own, if the gallant cowboys under Mustang Walter could not check the charge of the band of Comanches rushing headlong down upon the ranch, and gaining steadily upon the brave man who was flying for his life.

The imperilled man was Dashing Charlie!

Would the bugle-call to arms save him? Within sight of his goal, was he to perish and others with him?

CHAPTER VII.

A HERO IN THE FRAY.

RANCHERO MARKHAM felt a thrill of satisfaction that he had received at least a few minutes' warning of the coming danger from Comanches from the report brought by his daughter who had seen the traces of red-skins near.

The bugle-call for Mustang Walter and his men had sent them between the Indians and the ranch, when otherwise the on-rushing foe would have reached there about as soon as could the cowboys, and thus have been able to do a great deal of damage were the time of their stay ever so short.

Having sent Mustang Walter to the rescue of the pursued horseman, Mr. Markham prepared to lead the other cowboys to their support as soon as they should arrive, and so ordered his horse, while the half-dozen negro men about the place also prepared to defend the ranch under the direction of Beatrice, who was a real border girl, full of pluck and spirit. She was a crack-shot, and perfectly cool in times of trouble and danger.

Two cowboys had been left to guard the cattle across the narrow neck of the bend, while

the others, eight in number, came on with a rush to the ranch.

Placing himself at their head, and telling his daughter to rally and arm all of the servants for defense, in case the Indians should have a still larger support in the timber, Mr. Markham rode rapidly on after Mustang Walter and his little band of always-on hand followers.

A glance showed that the pursued stranger had dismounted and was running by the side of his horse, urging him to do his best.

The Indians were surely gaining, and a rapid count revealed sixty in number of the mounted warriors.

The timber from which they had emerged was quite two miles in their rear, and that cover might hold more warriors concealed there.

The dismounted horseman at last was seen to drop down with his horse, disappearing from sight in the tall prairie grass, just as a shower of arrows had been fired at him.

"He's done for, pard! but we must save his scalp!" cried Mustang Walter, as he spurred his mustang forward more rapidly.

"Yas, he's too game a fellow ter let ther reds raise his hair," responded one of the men, and the ten cowboys with their leader gave vent to one of their wild war-cries as they followed their chief at a more rapid gait.

But, suddenly, there came a shot; then another, and a third.

The puffs of smoke arose from the ground it seemed, where the horseman had gone down; and as the shots continued, slowly yet steadily, the Indians were seen to waver; the fierce red riders appeared to stagger, and the keen eyes of the cowboys beheld several saddles emptied and several horses fallen.

Not a shot of the now unseen horseman had failed to find a target either in a human form or a dumb beast; the stranger, of a truth, was a dead shot and a daring man.

Wildly Mustang Walter and his men again cheered, while the Indians, feeling that unless they made a rush their game would escape them, prepared for a charge right down upon the dauntless man at bay.

"Now, pard, let our rifles speak as we ride," cried Mustang Walter, and with the word the rifles of the cowboys went to their shoulders and rapidly rung the shots, making merry yet deadly music.

The Indians were again staggered; and then, suddenly, up from the grass rose the horseman in their front, his repeating rifle again charged, and his horse, also, rising, he leaped into the saddle and boldly rode toward the Comanches!

The check of the red-skins was complete, but only for an instant, for wild war-whoops were heard in their rear and from the timber dashed a force even larger than that confronting the dashing cowboys.

This looked bad for Mustang Walter and his men, for those in his front now regained courage and began to push forward once more, sure of support from their friends coming rapidly on after them.

But, Mustang Walter did not check his advance an instant, for he was determined to reach the brave fellow who yet stood so fearlessly in the path of his foes.

A glance over his shoulder showed him Mr. Markham and eight of his men coming on like the wind. True Texans do not count numbers in a fight for life.

A few more bounds of their horses and Mustang Walter called out:

"Ho! pard! Run for us! We will have to retreat, as there are no more to come."

"Ay, ay, pard! I am with you as soon as I give them a farewell!" came back in manly tones that had not an atom of fear in them.

And then again the deadly repeating-rifle of Dashing Charlie began to rattle out its leaden hail, and only with the last shot did he wheel his horse and dart away toward Mustang Walter and his men.

And not a moment too soon, for the Comanches were in easy range now and rushing on like a tornado.

"Thanks, pard, for your coming to my rescue. You saved my scalp. Now fight them as we retreat," cried Charlie Emmett, as the reader now knows the horseman to be, and he was reloading his deadly rifle as he spoke!

At once Mustang Walter yielded to Dashing Charlie the command. His orders were obeyed—the cowboys retreating after a carefully-aimed volley had been fired.

The Indians were momentarily checked by the galling fire, but soon came on once more, while the band in the rear were fairly flying to their succor.

They could see that they outnumbered, with both bands, their foes ten to one, and before them lay a well-stocked ranch, plenty of food and scalps by the dozen if they could only be victorious.

With such a prospect the Comanches were becoming desperate, and the cowboys knew they would have all they could do to hold their own, with the chances heavily against them of doing so.

But, on dashed Mr. Markham and his men, and ere the Indians could reach the four in their front in a mad rush, and cut them off, the ran-

cherio came up and a wild cheer rung out from the lips of all.

A full score of Texans were not to be easily ridden down; but what could they do with such odds against them?

Mr. Markham at once assumed command. A square was formed and a retreat begun toward the ranch as soon as a united and deadly-aimed volley had again checked the advance of the red-skins.

But the check was only temporary, as the warriors from the timber were now near at hand and it began to look as though the Texans must die in their tracks, when, suddenly, as the other body of Comanches dashed up on the run and joined their comrades, there came unlooked-for aid from the direction of the ranch.

CHAPTER VIII.

A FAIR HEROINE.

THE Comanches with their now doubled and united force seemed to feel assured of their prey, the grim and savage warriors beheld in their minds' eye a long string of scalps from pale-face heads, and plunder enough to enrich them, with hundreds of cattle and ponies to drive back to their villages with them.

The Markham Ranch was isolated, the nearest neighbor being miles away, and the country thinly settled; therefore the Comanches were well aware that before help could be gathered from the neighboring ranches it would be dawn, and by that time they would be a long way off on their retreat, with force enough to protect their rear.

Their retreat among the fastnesses of the hills was within a day and night's slow march, and the nature of the country would protect them upon the way.

So it was that the Indians were elated at seeing success within their very grasp, for they believed that their presence had been unknown, their coming a surprise, and that no reinforcements for the whites near.

The cowboys seemed to realize just what the Comanches did, and their faces looked anxious enough at the thought of what appeared to them inevitable.

They might retreat to the ranch and make a stand there, yet the pursuit would be so hot that they would hardly have time to turn about to defend the place.

If they did manage to stand off the Indians from burning the house itself, and thus save their lives, and the fair girl, whom they would, every one of them, give his life to protect, they could hardly hope to save the out-buildings, the cattle and the herd of ponies.

From the ranch they expected no relief, for there only was Beatrice Markham and seven or eight negro servants all told, four of the latter being women.

But, as we have stated, Beatrice was a girl of action and nerve, and she took in the situation coolly and intelligently.

Turning a spy-glass upon the distant timber she beheld there a number of Indian horsemen not visible to the unaided eye, and these would make an overwhelming force to pit against the few cowboys under her father.

At once she decided to act upon a plan of her own, and she did it promptly.

"Ben, ride with all speed and call in the two cowboys with the cattle, for they will not stray far. Tell them to bring in with them forty or fifty ponies, and to come in a hurry."

Ben darted away upon one of the stable horses, and then Beatrice turned to the group of negroes near her.

"Quick, all of you! get some hay and fetch it here; also some ropes, and I'll show you what we will do."

Rushing into the house, the young girl returned in a short while with her arms full of clothing, a quantity of which Mr. Markham kept on hand for the men.

This clothing was quickly stuffed with hay, sombreros fastened on it, and stake-ropes made ready to tie the dummy men thus created upon the ponies when they came.

By the time Beatrice and the servants had some thirty dummies ready, the two cowboys rode up with the horses.

"Quick, boys! there is trouble out upon the prairie yonder, and we must go to the rescue; so tie these mock men on the horses. Lively, all of you!"

The cowboys burst into uproarious laughter as they obeyed, and, aided by Beatrice and the servants, they soon had the horses ready with their imitation men.

"Now, Aunt Chloe, you stay and keep house, for all of the rest of us must go to make as large a show as possible."

And Beatrice turned to an old negress, while the other women looked aghast at the thought of making fighters out of them.

But Beatrice was in earnest, and the two women were aided upon the backs of gentle horses, the negro men and a boy sprung upon others, and the party was ready.

Beatrice came out of the house with an armful of weapons for the negroes, her own rifle being slung at her back, and to her belt hung her bugle.

Each cowboy then took a platoon of dummies, a lariat running through the bits of each horse's bridle, thus holding them in line. "I believe," she said, "the best of the lot, as far as appearances go."

Placing herself at the head of this remarkable cavalcade, Beatrice rode out of the yard upon the prairie.

It was just growing twilight, which, of course, was so much the better for the "soldiers" she had command of, for at a short distance it could not be told what they were, and they looked *bona fide* enough to intimidate the Indians.

Away off upon the prairie they could see the fight waging, hot and hard, between the small band of cowboys and the two bands of red-skins, now united.

The cowboys were retreating as rapidly as possible toward the ranch, fighting the Comanches back as they pressed on, and who, now, were feeling more and more certain of their prey.

The defenders were not half a mile away, and disputing every inch of ground.

"Just in time to save them," cried Beatrice, as she rode at the head of her remarkable battalion of cowboys, negro men and women and "mock men," and placing her bugle to her lips she sounded a charge.

It was this shrill and clear bugle-call that had surprised the cowboys and startled the red-skins.

"Bravo! a company of soldiers are coming to the rescue!" cried Mr. Markham, and the cowboys regained courage and hope at once, for they had begun to feel that their cause was a desperate one, indeed—that they all would have to die "with their boots on," before many hours had passed.

CHAPTER IX.

THE RETREAT.

THE cowboys did not retreat one foot after seeing that help was near at hand. They saw, as they believed in the dim light, half a hundred soldiers coming to their rescue, and with such a force added to their own, what would they care for the odds of two to one—the Comanches being about a hundred and fifty or sixty as they estimated them.

As for the Indians they did not require to be halted by the cowboys to come to a standstill, for they also believed that they saw a company of the dread blue-coat rangers coming to the rescue, and as many more might be flanking, to get in their rear.

Over the course they had fought lay dead and dying red-skins, and they had lost heavily in ponies until more than a dozen warriors were dismounted.

These would have to mount behind comrades, and the dead and dying would have to be picked up and carried off, thus hampering their retreat.

Even if those in their front were all, they were strong enough to hold their foes at bay, and the other ranchers would before long send out their cowboy fighting forces, so that sure defeat was upon the Indian band according to their own reasoning.

With this knowledge they at once began the retreat, the main force doggedly, while a smaller one went rapidly on ahead to gather up the dead and dying braves.

Loud rung the bugle-notes as the rescuers came on, and the cowboys began to press the red-skins closely, feeling assured of a strong support.

"Tony, ride ahead with all speed and check the men, for they really think we have reinforcements, I do believe," cried Beatrice, and the cowboy addressed as Tony darted ahead at full speed.

The cowboys had not escaped scathless by any means, for a number of them were suffering from arrow-wounds, two had been killed, and two-thirds of their horses were rendered almost useless by their wounds.

As Tony dashed up, however, they were making as determined an advance as they could, while the Indians were in full and rapid retreat.

"I say, cap'n, Miss Beatrice says don't yer go too far, for we has no force ter back yer up," cried Tony as he drew rein in the middle of the party and was greeted with a yell.

"Has no force, Tony? Ar'n't they soldiers?" demanded Mr. Markham.

"Not a photograph of a soldier, cap'n."

"Who then are they?"

"Miss Beatrice is cap'n of the outfit, me and Dick is lieutenants, and then there is the negroes, women, boy and all except old Auntie Chloe."

"And the others?" asked Captain Markham amid a burst of laughter.

"Is cowboys' duds stuffed with hay and tied onther ponies."

A burst of terrific laughter came from the cowboys, wounded men and all at this information.

Their dead comrades, their sufferings, their dangers passed through and the presence of the

Indians were forgotten, and peal after peal of laughter rung out over the prairie as the men reassembled.

"Bravo for Miss Beatrice the queen of em all!" cried Mustang Walter as just then Beatrice and her "outfit" drew near.

She answered the burst of welcome with a peal on her bugle, and dashing up cried:

"Oh, father! how happy I am that you have all escaped."

"But, did they kill that brave stranger?"

"No, my child, he is here to speak for himself, though wounded, I believe; but, I have not yet had the pleasure of knowing who it is that has saved my ranch, for his coming gave us warning just in time," and Captain Markham turned to the stranger in their midst, who answered:

"I am known on the Northern border, sir, as Charlie Emmett, scout and guide."

"Ah! I have often heard of you, sir! You are Dashing Charlie! That accounts for that masterly retreat before such odds. You did splendid service, sir!"

"My daughter, Mr. Emmett, and these men are Mustang Walter and his cowboys."

Dashing Charlie raised his sombrero politely to Beatrice, and turning to the cowboys said:

"We have already become friends, pards, for I owe to you my life, as my horse was too dead beat to reach the ranch; and I think, miss, we all owe to you our present safety."

"I thought I could make a show of force that might help, and it seems I fooled you all, too," said Beatrice, laughingly.

"Permit me, sir, to take your daughter's make-believe soldiers, and go on after the red-skins, who must still believe they are pursued."

"But I will have to borrow a fresh horse from your outfit, miss," Dashing Charlie said.

"I will take my unwounded men, and more of the dummies, and push on, for you, sir, are wounded and must return to the ranch with the captain," Mustang Walter remarked, and he and his men gazed upon Dashing Charlie with great admiration, for his fame as scout and Indian-fighter was well known to them.

"Yes, that is just it, sir; you must return with us, while you, Mustang Walter, can make a show of pursuit, though do not go too far."

Captain Markham's suggestion was at once acted upon, for Mustang Walter took eight of his "brigade" and the best of the "dummies," so as to present the appearance of a force over thirty strong, and pushed on after the now rapidly retreating Indians.

The two dead cowboys were thrown across the backs of ponies, and, with the wounded, all started for the ranch, greatly to the delight of the negroes, who were only too glad to take the back trail for home. Their terror had been ludicrously manifest.

CHAPTER X.

DASHING CHARLIE'S STORY.

"As your men are pretty badly used up, sir, would it not be well to send a couple of messengers to give the alarm to the other ranchers for the Indians should be pressed close to their retreat."

So asked Dashing Charlie as the party started homeward, and three men were at once dispatched for fresh horses to spread the alarm along the line of border ranches, appointing Captain Markham's home as a rallying point.

"I thank you for the suggestion, Mr. Emmett," said Captain Markham as they rode along together homeward, the scout upon one side, Beatrice on the other, and the remainder following behind them.

Arriving at the ranch the first care was taken of the wounded, and Dashing Charlie having three arrow-wounds, though they were slight, was first cared for in spite of his saying they amounted to nothing.

He then looked to his horse, which had also been clipped several times with arrows, and rubbing the animal down well he stabled him comfortably and then aided in the care of others.

The two dead cowboys were taken to their quarters and prepared for burial, and the wounded were given pleasant quarters at the ranch.

The "guests' room" was assigned to Dashing Charlie, and a supper was served all around, old Aunt Chloe having devoted herself to preparing it, well knowing it would be appreciated.

After supper a courier came from Mustang Walter that the Indians had halted at the foot-hills, as though to make a fight and Captain Markham said at once that the wisdom of arousing the ranchers was revealed now, for they would flank the position and thus deal another blow to the savages.

Then the men began to arrive in twos, threes, and a few in parties of a dozen, until by midnight half a hundred cowboys from the ranches had put in an appearance.

It was then decided, as there were plenty of fresh horses on the Markham Ranch, that all should mount, Captain Markham should be made captain and a rapid flank movement be made to cut the Indians off, a few going to the support of Mustang Walter in the front.

So the men mounted fresh animals and start-

ed off at a gallop, pushing their horses hard so as to strike in the rear of the Indians by dawn.

Dashing Charlie would go along, though tired from his long ride from New Mexico, and all knew that he was a host in himself.

The horses were not spared and the rear of the Indian troop was reached just before dawn, and a complete surprise awaited them, for, not being pressed by a large force they began to feel their strength and meditate a dash back, the following night, with a band of picked warriors.

But, after a short rest the cowboys dashed into their camps from the rear and their revolvers played deadly havoc with the now panic-stricken red-skins, for Mustang Walter and his men also pressed forward in the front.

The stampede was complete, hardly a warrior escaping mounted, so that the dead, wounded and ponies fell into the hands of the cowboys, few of whom had been wounded and only two slain.

"Thanks to you, Dashing Charlie, we have given them a lesson they will not soon forget; but let me add that I think you are a giant in a fray."

"Thank you, Captain Markham, but I did no more than the others, and I congratulate you upon your success," was the modest response of the scout.

Leaving Mustang Walter in command, to bring the party on home, and the wounded Indians to be sent after by their comrades, for one brave had been told to go and report to his people that their companions were not to be made prisoners, Captain Markham started homeward accompanied by Dashing Charlie and a small escort.

They reached the ranch to a late breakfast, after which Dashing Charlie sought his room utterly worn out and did not put in an appearance again until late in the evening.

He found Captain Markham and Beatrice seated alone upon the piazza when he came out of his room, and after greeting him the young girl went to have his supper prepared.

"I would not have you called, Mr. Emmett, for I knew that you were completely worn out.

"I trust you are well rested?"

"Perfectly, sir, I may say, and I needed it, for I am just off of a ten days' trail, the last day of which was a chase."

"Indeed! then you had not just struck the red-skins when we saw you?"

"Oh, no, Captain Markham, for a band of them had chased me since morning.

"They had fresh horses, too, but, then, my horse did not care for that and kept well ahead.

"As the evening approached I sighted those in the timber and seeing that they were discovered they stretched out in line to head me off, and those in my rear did the same.

"I broke through those in my front by taking a ravine, tired as my horse was, which headed them off, and thus gained a lead of a quarter of a mile.

"But my poor horse was bad beat, and I saw that the ranch was too far off for me to reach it.

"Then you came to my aid, and you know the rest, Captain Markham, and that I owe to you and your gallant men my life."

"As we owe our lives to you, and that my home is not in ashes now, for had you not broken through that Indian line they would have completely surprised us, though Beatrice reported seeing Indian signs over on Blue Creek, and I had ordered Mustang Walter and some of his cowboys to go off on a scout.

"We owe to you, Dashing Charlie, more than we can ever repay."

"Yes, indeed we do, sir," and Beatrice came out of the house just as her father had spoken and in her frank way held out her hand to the scout.

CHAPTER XI.

THE MISSION SUCCESSFUL.

AFTER enjoying a hearty supper, Dashing Charlie accompanied the ranchero and his daughter again to the piazza.

That the scout had come upon any business with him, Captain Markham had not the remotest idea, so he was surprised to hear him say:

"Now, Captain Markham, I wish to make known to you and your daughter the cause of my coming to see you."

"So your visit was really intended for me, Mr. Emmett?"

"Yes, sir, I came from New Mexico to see you."

"From New Mexico?"

"Yes, from the mines there where there is one living who sent me to you."

"Ah! can you mean my unhappy brother Matthew?"

"It is he whom I refer to, Captain Markham."

"You know poor Matt then?" sadly said the ranchero.

"He sent me to you, sir."

"Indeed! has he met with any misfortune, may I ask? If so I will gladly be of service to him."

"In fact, Mr. Emmett, it would be a great

gratification to me if my brother would come and make his home with us, for I know that he has been unfortunate and the world has gone hard with him, while what feeling was engendered between us in the past on my part has long since been forgotten."

"Such sentiments, Captain Markham, are just what I expected from you after meeting you," said the scout.

"Indeed, I do wish uncle Matt would come and live with us, Mr. Emmett, for mamma often spoke to me of him, and I know that he has had much sorrow in his life, though just what it all was I never understood."

"Yes, he must come to our home and we will make him happy," and Beatrice was most earnest in what she said.

"Well, let me tell you both that Miner Matt Markham is not in misfortune, nor is he in want, for he has dug a handsome fortune from the mines."

"Indeed I am glad to hear this, for he deserves some recompense in his later years for all that he has suffered," Captain Markham said heartily.

"Yes, Captain Markham, he struck it rich some years ago, and has annually laid aside, or rather hidden away, a large amount of gold-dust."

"No more than for his needs has he disposed of, and none has been sent away to the banks."

"All he has dug he has put away in a secret hiding-place until the amount now foots up to a big fortune, as I learn from his own lips."

"But what is now his cause of suffering is that he is ill."

"Ill! then I must seek him at once."

"I do not know, Mr. Emmett, whether you know aught of Matt's life or mine, but—"

"I know all, sir, from his own lips, and he has not spared himself."

"Well, it is my duty to seek him now that he is ill."

"It was with the purpose of having you return with me, sir, that I came."

"Can this be possible?"

"It is, sir."

"I will go whenever you are ready to return."

"I will say to-morrow then, sir."

"You will be able?"

"Yes, sir."

"You have had a hard ride of it, and—"

"I feel that, sir; but delays are dangerous, and the trail is one that needs care in traversing, as you will understand when I tell you that I am the seventh man whom your brother sent after you."

"What?"

"It is true."

"And the others?"

"Excepting one who is a captive among the Comanches, the others are all dead."

"You amaze me, Dashing Charlie."

"It is but the truth, sir."

"But what fatality has attended these men?"

"Your brother is known to have hidden his fortune, and the messengers, it was also known, were sent to you."

"Comanches lay between here and there in great numbers for one thing, while a band of road-agents, known as the Mounted Marauders, are commanded by a chief who sought your brother's messengers, hoping that they bore maps and papers regarding the secret hiding-place of the gold."

"Thus have these men fallen."

"While you escaped?"

"I was thus fortunate, sir, and I trust I can guide you back to the mines without mishap."

"Cannot I go too, father?" asked Beatrice, who had been an attentive listener to all that was said.

"No, no, my child, the trip is too full of danger for you; but I will accompany my brave friend here to my unfortunate brother."

"But tell me, Mr. Emmett, when did you leave him?"

"Ten days ago, sir."

"He dwells in a mining-camp?"

"Yes, sir, though his cabin is apart from the regular camps."

"In New Mexico?"

"Yes, sir."

"What was the nature of his illness?"

"Consumption."

"Poor fellow, then he is doomed."

"I fear there is no hope for him, sir, and that he will last very long I cannot even believe, and hence I hasten you upon the return."

"I will be ready to-morrow, Mr. Emmett, and I am under the deepest obligations to you for coming after me, for I can readily realize all that you risked to get here."

"I volunteered to take care of Miner Markham in my turn, as we all do, and somehow he told me of his early life and how he had longed to have you come to him and be with him in his last hours."

"Then I said I would come after you and here I am, so that is all there is to it, Captain Markham."

"To hear you confess it in your modest way, yes; but there is much more, much more, and I thank you for coming with all my heart; but I hope I may yet bring Matt back with me."

"Do not encourage any false hope, sir."

"Ah! it is bad as that then?"

"Well, to-morrow we start."

And the morrow found them upon their way to the cabin of old Miner Matt Markham.

CHAPTER XII.

MUELLO THE MEXICAN.

IN the recesses of a mountain range in New Mexico, through which ran an Overland Stage trail to the mines, was a haunt which neither the soldiers from the forts, the Regulator Rangers nor the scouts had been able to locate.

It was the retreat of a band of outlaws known far and wide as "The Mounted Marauders," a band as merciless as death itself, as "unning as coyotes and whose movements were as mysterious as the alleged midnight tramping. - ghosts and spooks."

These Mounted Marauders were wont to haunt the trails, dashing in upon a stage, or travelers on foot or horseback, and also occasionally making a raid upon the mining camps.

Splendidly mounted, knowing the country as thoroughly as the Indians, fearless and utterly reckless, they were to be dreaded by all law-abiding men who had sought a home and fortune in the far West.

It was said that their leader was a Mexican, a conspirator who had sought an asylum in the United States to save his neck for his crimes in his own country.

But, not a soul had ever seen him unmasked, and though he had issued commands in perfect Spanish, he also had addressed prisoners in just as pure English.

If there was an accent, foreign to either tongue, it had not been noticed.

The dress of these Marauders was a peculiar one, and had gained for them the name of the "Black Gold-Hunters."

The chief, when presented to the reader, is seated in a camp-chair, which is easy and comfortable, though it can be folded up in an instant and strapped to a pack-horse.

His camp equipage is of a like kind, for there is a canvas cot that also can be folded up, a folding-table as well, and an "A" tent, with a few cooking utensils.

The whole outfit could be stored away upon one horse and not weigh over fifty pounds.

The chief is dressed in black, for he wears a double-breasted, close-fitting frock coat, of broadcloth, pants to match stuck in top-boots coming over his knees, and a sable sombrero.

He also wears a white shirt that is scrupulously clean, black gauntlet gloves, and a close-fitting black mask which completely conceals every feature of his face.

His hair is worn long and is jet-black, and so he stands wholly unknown except to the few whom he wishes to behold him as he is.

His form is tall and athletic, and about his waist is a black belt in which are four revolvers, one on either hip, one on each side, and he carries no other weapon; but twenty-four shots to such a man would be enough for defense or offense.

The camp of this chief of the "Gold-Hunters" is at the head of a canyon, and below him are half a dozen tents similar to his own, though larger.

These are the quarters of his men, and they extend across the canyon some distance below where the chief is located.

The men are also dressed in black, but wear jackets instead of frock coats, and they are not masked.

Between their camps and their chief is a fertile stretch of grass, and a small stream, while feeding in the space are half a hundred horses, not one of which is an inferior animal, and, strange to say, all of them are jet-black!

Saddles, bridles and pack-saddles are ranged in rows ready for instant use, and there is every indication that the gang can break camp and be on the march in five minutes' time.

There are some twenty men visible in the camp, and among them are Americans, Irish, negroes, Mexicans, and two Chinamen, a motley, dangerous, desperate-looking band, taken altogether.

As the chief sat in his easy camp-chair, he was engaged in reading a paper, but looked up quickly as the sound of hoofs echoed through the canyon.

He glanced down toward the camps and saw a horseman appear in sight, dash through the line of tents and come on toward his quarters.

The man was in the costume of the band, and, dismounting as he drew rein, approached his chief and saluted politely.

"Well, Saunders, what news have you?" asked the chief.

"They are on their way to the mines, Captain Muello, and are about a day behind me, for I have ridden hard."

"Both you and your horse show that much, Saunders. But, by what trail do they come?"

"The northern trail, sir."

"How many of them?"

"Two, sir—no more."

"The scout, Dashing Charlie, and Ranchero Markham?"

"Yes, sir."

The chief stretched his hand out to the table, took up a bugle and gave three sharp blasts.

Instantly the men in the camp came quickly toward him, ranging themselves in line as they halted.

"Men, I wish to say to you that Saunders reports the coming of those I seek to capture."

"They are coming, he says, by the northern trail, yet there are two others that they can take from the river, so I wish three of my best men to go with all speed to the trails, lie in ambush, and await the coming of these two, upon the capture of whom depends so much."

"The one who sees them pass must make a flank movement and bring me the news with all haste, so that I can act."

"If we capture them, then I will pardon the two men now under sentence of death for allowing Dashing Charlie to escape from the mining-camps and not giving me timely notice."

"Remember, these two travelers are to be taken alive, for their death but carries to the grave with them the secret I would find out—which is, where old Miner Matt's treasure is hidden, for he sent, I am sure, by Dashing Charlie, papers and maps showing the hiding-place of the gold."

"Do you understand, men?"

"Ay, ay, chief!" came in a chorus of voices.

"Then to your camps and be ready for the saddle at an instant's notice."

The men saluted and departed; three, who were the next on duty call, rode away to lie in ambush for the coming of the victims, Dashing Charlie and Ranchero Markham by the northern trail.

When they had gone Captain Muello said in a self-satisfied manner to himself:

"The chance is at last before me to make a fortune at one stroke, for once I get possession of that old miner's gold then will Muello the Mexican be heard of no more, not even by his men, for not a soul knows to-day who I am."

CHAPTER XIII.

OLD RHUBARB MAKES A PROFESSIONAL CALL.

OLD Miner Matt Markham looked greatly relieved after he had bidden farewell to Dashing Charlie, for he had confidence that his mission would at last be successfully carried out.

"I believe the brave fellow will pass through every danger, and bring my brother to me in safety."

"Once I have clasped his hand, and heard from his own lips that I am forgiven, I will be content to die."

"It will be a just atonement for me to give to his and her child the fortune I have striven so hard to win."

"Well, the end is not far away now, for this cough racks my very vitals; but hope will build me up and I will live to see my brother—I must live that long!"

"I will be content to die only then—content to lay the cares and sorrows of my sinful life in the grave."

So mused the old man as he sat alone in his cabin before the log fire on the hearth.

After a long reverie he arose, threw aside his garments and lay down to rest.

The morning found him feeling better by far than for weeks before. He had rallied under the hope of soon seeing his brother and closing up his earthly accounts.

He arose, threw more logs upon the fire, drew out some glowing coals and cooked his frugal breakfast.

A trip to the spring near by for water, and the staking of his horse out to fresh pastureage tired him beyond his strength and he spent the remainder of the day in resting.

In the afternoon Doctor Zekiel Quick, better known as Old Rhubarb, visited him, as was his wont, once a week; but he said that Dashing Charlie had ordered him to call daily for awhile, and also to find some one to spend the night with his patient.

"No, Pard Doctor, I don't wish any one to come at night, for I am all right and wish to be alone—alone with my thoughts."

"Rather unpleasant company my thoughts would be for me. I prefer any other associate," declared Old Rhubarb gruffly.

"Well, mine are far from pleasant, but I bear them as a punishment, Pard Doc."

"Now, I don't go nosing round to look up any punishments for myself—I prefer to dodge it all."

"Yes, in good health; but there will come a day, Doctor Quick, when you are brought face to face with your misdeeds of the past, as I am now, and cannot escape them. Then you will have to think."

"Maybe so, but if I can make a fortune here, I can purchase absolution and live a fairly good life on my riches for the remainder of my days on earth."

"If I am poor, then I will be a sinner up to the end, and my prayer will be to die with my boots on."

"But come, Miner Matt, don't get blue, for it will do no good. Cheer up, and let me send some one to stay nights with you, while that mysterious fellow, Dashing Charlie, is away."

"No, I prefer to be alone; but I will be glad

to have you come each day, and I will pay you well for your trouble."

"Not the slightest fear but you will, pard; but will Dashing Charlie be back soon?"

"I do not know."

"Has he left the mines?"

"He is his own master and can and will do as he pleases."

"Well, I'll drop in each day, though at what hour I can't say, for I'm pretty busy now, with gunshot wounds among the fighters, and fevers all around. That fellow Racket Rob managed to shoot himself—"

"What! Racket Rob dead?" asked the miner, in a startled tone.

"Oh no, no such luck for his enemies; but he dropped his revolver and shot himself in the arm."

"When was this?"

"Last night."

"Where?"

"At his cabin."

"You are sure?"

"Well, he came after me to fix him up, and it was when I was there that Dashing Charlie came."

"Dashing Charlie came to Racket Rob's cabin?"

"Yes."

"When was this?"

"Last night."

"What did he go there for?"

"Well, he said he was going away, and wanted Racket Rob to go up and look after you as nurse."

"He said this?"

"He did."

"Strange, very strange."

"Then, as he could not go, being wounded, as I said, he asked me to see you daily and be sure and have some one to look after you."

"Strange, very strange," again muttered the old miner, and soon after the doctor took his leave muttering to himself:

"Dashing Charlie had some other motive in coming to Racket Rob's cabin than to ask him to look after the old miner."

"Then, too, Racket Rob did not fool me about that bullet-wound, for it was no accident; he never shot himself, for the bullet came from behind and ranged downward, not upward; it ran through, not up the arm."

"It's my opinion Dashing Charlie fired that shot; but, then, knowing nothing, I can and will learn more."

"Old Matt is going to die, that is certain. It is only a question of time, perhaps only a few weeks."

And while Old Rhubarb was riding back to the camps, Matthew Markham was wondering what had taken Dashing Charlie upon so strange an errand as to ask the man, whom he had confessed to Emmett was his foe, to become his nurse during his absence!

CHAPTER XIV.

AN UNLOOKED FOR RETURN.

THE more Matthew Markham pondered over the mysterious action of Dashing Charlie, in going after Racket Rob, the more he was at a loss to understand it.

As night came on he roused himself to get his supper, bring a pail of water from the spring, take his horse on a fresh pastureage and prepare to pass the long and dreary night alone.

He waited until darkness fell, then threw heavy logs upon the fire and laid down to rest, to sleep if it was possible for slumber to come to him.

Thus an hour had passed when he heard hoof-falls without.

"Who can that be?" he asked himself, not a little anxiously.

After a moment of silence a step approached the door, and a loud knock followed.

"Well, who is there?"

"It is me, old gentleman."

"I had to come back again."

"Ah! is that you, Charlie?"

"Ay, ay, pard."

"I'll open the door in a minute," and the old miner arose, took down the bar and threw open the door.

In strode the tall form of Dashing Charlie, and he threw himself into a seat in the shadow with the remark:

"The light dazes my eyes, for I have a headache."

The miner barred the door again, returned to his cot and asked, sadly:

"Well, you have given up the trail?"

"Oh, no!"

"What then?"

"Well you see, old man, I concluded that you ought to post me more than you have on this trip?"

"What more can I tell you?"

"Well, it's dangerous work, I can tell you, and I want to get everything down right, so go over the whole affair for me again."

"You mean my instructions?"

"Of course, for I do not wish to make any mistake."

"Nor do I wish you to, my young friend."

"Then chin it out again, old man, from A to Z."

"You were to go to Texas."

"Just so."

"To the ranch of my brother in the cattle-grazing country."

"Exactly, but I did not write the name down, or the location of his ranch."

"I thought you had it all in your mind."

"I do not wish to trust my memory."

"My brother's name is Richard Markham, and his home is known as Ranger's Rest Ranch, for he was captain of the Rangers for some time, and it is on the stream the cowboys know as Dead Man's Run, from the fact that so many men have lost their lives in it."

"I see."

"I'll find him."

"And you are to bring him to me, giving him the papers I handed you for him, for he will come."

The scout started and then said in an embarrassed way:

"The truth is, old pard, I hate to confess to you why I came back."

"Out with it, my young friend!"

"Well, I had my coat thrown over my saddle and the papers in the breast-pocket. While crossing a stream this morning out dropped the big envelope, and before I could rescue it away it went down the stream and whirled over a cataract."

"That is bad."

"So I came back to tell you I would fix them all up for you again and start anew, this time being more careful."

"No, there is no need of that. Just tell my brother to come back with you, and he will do it, I know."

"And the papers?"

"Well, no one will find the package in the stream. You can simply tell my brother my condition and bid him come at once to me."

"Better fix up the papers again for me."

"No."

"I will do it for you."

"Never mind; only do as I ask you."

The scout looked disappointed and still urged, until he saw the miner was growing impatient, when he said:

"Well, you know best, old pard, and I'll do as you say. Now, I'll be off."

"One minute, Dashing Charlie?"

"Well?"

"Why did you go to the cabin of Racket Rob to ask him to come here and be my nurse?"

"Well, I had to leave you alone, pard."

"After my telling you what I heard of Racket Rob, that I believed him to be my worst enemy?"

The man hesitated before he replied:

"Well, I had some one to watch him if he came, and thus to catch him if he was up to any deviltry."

"Ah, I see; that was it!"

"Yes."

"I am glad I understand it now, for I was worried about it."

"Don't worry, old man, for I'll see you through all right; but, let me tell you that I lost my money where I did the letter, so must ask you to help me out, as I shall need funds."

"Certainly; and you shall have all you wish."

"Shall I get the gold-dust for you?"

"No, for I have money here in my belt," and again the scout looked disappointed, as the old miner took from his belt a roll of bills and said:

"Here are three hundred dollars for expenses—but, how much did you lose?"

"A roll of five hundred."

"Well, here are two hundred more to make it up. Now let me beg of you not to delay upon your trail."

"I'll make all the speed I can. Good-night."

The scout extended his hand, and the next moment was gone.

The miner closed the door after him and then lay down again.

"Strange that I should have such a change of feeling against that young scout; but, somehow, I do not trust him as I did, and I now almost despair of ever seeing my brother."

"He seemed cold, grasping and unsympathetic this time."

"Well, I can only pray that all will be well. I can only hope, and hope is all that keeps me up."

CHAPTER XV.

HAS HE A DOUBLE?

OLD Miner Markham passed a restless night, after the departure of the scout.

He hardly slept at all, and when the day dawned found himself feeling much enfeebled and feverish.

In the morning the doctor came and at once noticed his changed condition, for he said:

"This won't do, Miner Matt, for you have been worrying about something."

"The truth is, I have, Doc."

"Well, out with it, for perhaps I can help you."

"Who did?"
 "The scout."
 "What scout?"
 "Dashing Charlie."
 "Ah!"
 "I sent him on a mission of greatest importance to me."
 "When?"
 "Last night."
 "To the camps?"
 "Oh no."
 "Where then?"
 "To Texas."
 "Well, he has not gone."
 "What?"
 "When was he to leave?"
 "He did leave before nine o'clock last night."
 "He did nothing of the kind."
 "What do you mean, Doc?"
 "I mean that I saw him at daybreak."
 "You did?"
 "I did."
 "Where?"
 "In the camps."
 "What was he doing there?"
 "Gambling."
 "Nonsense, for he told me that he never played cards."
 "He lied to you."
 "I cannot believe it."
 "Well he did, for I won several hundreds from him last night."
 "You did?"
 "I certainly did."
 "At what time?"
 "About ten o'clock it was, when he came into Poker Paul's Den of Destiny at the camps and said he had money to throw to the birds."
 "He had been drinking, and as he bantered me I played him for big stakes and won all he had, I guess, for he offered to put up his watch and a ring also to continue the game; but I refused, and soon after he left the Den of Destiny and it was then daylight."
 "Why he told me he never drank."
 "He lied again, that is all."
 "Where is he now?"
 "Sleeping off his drunk somewhere, I guess."
 The pained look upon the old miner's face caused the doctor to see that he had committed an error in saying what he had, for he saw that it had made him suffer deeply.
 So he hastened to add:
 "Well, Pard Matt, we all of us have our faults, and now that Dashing Charlie has gone dead broke, and must have a head on him as big as a flour-barrel from drinking rum at Poker Paul's Den, he will doubtless be glad to take the trail and is now off on your mission."
 "I cannot believe it of him now, Doc, and if he is broke he can never go on that mission."
 "Ah, me! again are my hopes blasted."
 "Trust me, old pard, and I'll do it for you, for of course you are willing to pay for my time?"
 "Yes, if I took it, and trusted you; but now I will trust no man."
 "I will simply wait, feeling that I have done my duty, and when I feel death close at hand I will call half a dozen of the best men in the camps about me and tell them my secret, for surely they will not all go wrong, they will not wrong a dying man."
 Doctor Zekiel Quick was not complimented at the opinion of the miner regarding him, yet could say nothing.
 So he gave him a soothing powder and promising to find out for him whether Dashing Charlie had left camp or not, and report the next day, he took his leave, the old miner again refusing to allow any one to remain with him over night.
 Miner Markham spent another day and night of suffering, both physical and mental, and longed for the visit of Old Rhubarb the following day, when he would know whether Dashing Charlie was still in the camps or not.
 Doctor Quick was a very selfish mortal, and where his own interests were concerned he never neglected himself. As the miner would not trust him with his secret, he was determined to so ingratiate himself into his favor as to be chosen one of those selected to look after his affairs should he feel that he was dying and wish to call them together.
 So his first duty had been to look up Dashing Charlie all through the camps.
 When he came upon his next visit to the old miner he saw a change in him, that he could not but note was for the worse.
 "If he is going to collapse I must arrange to be here alone with him, for at the last he will be compelled to trust me," he muttered.
 "Did you see him?" eagerly asked the miner as the doctor entered his cabin.
 "No, he has gone."
 "Gone where?"
 "Upon your mission, doubtless, for he mounted his horse at daybreak and rode out of the camps."
 "This proves nothing."
 "Well, I questioned the miners and he was seen at noon bound on the southern trail."
 "Ah! then after all he may have gone."
 "Yes, but I saw many who were surprised at Dashing Charlie's gambling and drinking."
 "Well?"

"They said they had never seen him play cards or drink before."
 "What can have come over him?"
 "Well, I met one man who vowed that Dashing Charlie was dead and that it was his spirit at the Den night before last."
 "Nonsense!"
 "Of course I think so, as a physician; but then another miner suggested that Dashing Charlie had a *Double*."
 "A *Double*?" cried the miner, excitedly.
 "Yes, for he swore that Dashing Charlie wore no ring, and the man I played with did, while there were other reasons, he said, for his belief that the scout has a *Double*."
 The miner grew very uneasy now, and at last said excitedly:
 "Tell me more."
 "The *Double* idea seemed to strike others, and a number of reasons were given for believing that the man in the Den of Destiny the other night was not Dashing Charlie."
 "What do you think, Pard Doc?"
 "I almost doubt the fact myself, though I did not know the scout well."
 "And I do doubt it, for I feel convinced now that Dashing Charlie is as true as steel and that he has a *Double*," said the old miner, impressively.

CHAPTER XVI.

A REPENTANT FOE.

patient lay in his cot watching the sunlight fade from the valley, for the door was open to let in the balmy breeze.

"And so fades my life away, so draw the shadows over me," he murmured.

"What am I to believe?" he went on, musing aloud. "Can it be that this man seen in the camps is Dashing Charlie, or his *Double*?"

"That man Quick could hardly be mistaken, I should think, after playing a game of cards with him."

"Yet it seems strange that a man with the face of the one who undertook that mission for me could be thus guilty of going back upon a dying man, one who would do much for him if he accomplished his work."

"Ah me! here I am dying without a friend in the world, far from kindred and all whom my actions separated me from."

"I brought my sorrows upon my own head, so have no one to blame but myself."

"So be it, and if I do not soon arrange my affairs, strangers will get my riches instead of the one I intend them for."

"Yes, I must delay no longer, but ask the doctor to-morrow just what he thinks, just how long I have to live."

"He seems kind and disinterested, and I will let him select the men into whose keeping I leave my buried treasure, to be given to my niece, her child and Dick's."

"It would be too great a temptation to leave in the hands of one person, but half a dozen men surely would not all go wrong, all fail me."

And so the man mused while the shadows deepened in the valley, the sunlight growing fainter and fainter until the hilltops were alone gilded with golden rays.

These, too, faded away, and the dying man made an effort to rise, throw wood upon the expiring embers on the hearth and close the door for the night.

It was an effort, too, for he was becoming more and more enfeebled each day.

As he arose from his cot and approached the door, a form suddenly confronted him.

"Robert Brackett!" cried the miner, starting back in surprise and dread.

"Yes, Matthew Markham, I am Robert Brackett, once your foe, now your friend, and, repenting the past, have come to ask you to forgive me," and Racket Rob stood with bowed, uncovered head before the amazed miner.

CHAPTER XVII.

A CONFESSION OF SIN.

WHILE Matt Markham lay musing upon his cot, in the solitude and desolation of his cabin, and watching the moonlight die out of the valley and the shadows deepen, two men were riding toward his little home.

They turned off of the trail following the valley and seeking a secluded spot among the hills there dismounted and tied their horses.

Then they advanced on foot up Good Luck Canyon until they reached a spot where they would have to cross in full view before the open door of the cabin.

Here one of them halted and said:

"I will wait here, so you go on alone. When the door is closed I will come on and be at hand ready for your call."

The other now crossed the space. He was not seen by the miner, and soon after he entered the door of the cabin just as the sick man was advancing to close it.

It was Racket Rob, and as he stood there, after his few repentant words to Miner Markham, he looked the picture of humiliation and regret.

"You have come here to me, to ask me to forgive you, Robert Racket?" cried the miner, gaining sudden strength by the presence of the man who had appeared like an apparition before him.

"Yes, Matt, my old friend, I have come to you to humble myself before you; but you are not strong; you look weak and worn; so lie down there on your cot while I talk to you."

"Come, the night is growing chill, so I will throw wood on the fire and close the door; then I can talk to you."

"We were friends, old pard, in the olden time, and now that you are ill and suffering it has made me regret more bitterly than ever the cruel past, and has brought me to you."

The words were kindly uttered, the tone gentle and full of sorrow. Matt Markham yielded to him and lay down upon the lounge.

The left arm of Racket Rob was worn in a sling, but he threw wood on the fire, soon having a cheery blaze, and then, closing the door, drew up a chair and sat near the invalid miner.

"Matt, sitting here by you carries me far back in years to the time when you drew me out of the creek, when we attended Professor Rinear's school together."

"It would have been better far had you left me to drown that day, for my life has been more than a blank; it has been full of evil thoughts and acts."

"But, you risked your life to save mine, and I did not believe I could ever forget it. Perhaps I would never have done so had not a woman

come between us, for I loved Beatrice Gibbs and that made a demon of me. I felt that both you and your brother stood in my way.

"I now wish to make to you a confession, for I have suffered the torments of the damned in all those years of watching and waiting.

"I wish to confess to you that it was I who set the mansion on fire the night your brother saved Beatrice from the flames.

"I wish to confess that I placed in her room an open bottle of chloroform, to have her inhale its powers and thus be unable to save herself.

"I did the same in your room and Dick's, intending that you, too, should perish."

"My God!" groaned the miner.

"I do not wonder that you are horrified, for it was the act of a fiend.

"Having prepared for the death of the girl, whom I hated after her refusal of me, and of you, my rivals—for I felt that one of you would win her—I set the house on fire.

"It kindled more rapidly than I anticipated, and you escaped before you were affected by the drug, and Beatrice was just dazed enough to prevent her escape, when your brother Dick rescued her.

"You know the result, and that in my drunkenness I said enough to cause me to fly for my life, for there were two lives lost in the burning of the mansion.

"Well, Matt, old friend, I have been a dissipated vagabond all these years, a fugitive from justice, and only of late have I come to my senses and stopped carousing.

"I gave up liquor, and with a clear mind once more, it came to me how I had wronged you, and as I saw you ill and in distress, with no one near to aid you, and recalled that I had been the cause of all your misery. I determined to come to you, old friend, confess my wickedness, and beg you to forgive me if it lay in your heart to do so, if it is possible that such a crime as mine can be forgiven.

"I came to you, Matt, to ask if I cannot atone for my past all that lies in my power by caring for you in your illness by trying to cheer you up, to restore you to health.

"My life is broken, my dissipation has undermined my health, and it will not be long before I am called to lie upon a bed of death, and so it is I plead to let me serve you.

"Will you do this for me, Matt, for I am in that state now when life is a curse to me, and glad would I be to end it, to free myself from its torments; but in serving you, in ministering to your wants, I will feel contented at least; so do not say me nay, Matt, (I pard'!)

The man stood quivering before the miner as he spoke, his whole face writhing with anguish and his eyes turned pleadingly upon the old invalid as he addressed him.

And as the vagabond uttered the words, he dropped upon his knees and stretched out his hands appealingly.

"Don't say me nay, Miner Matt, or you settle my doom forever!"

"I will not say you nay, Robert Brackett, for I will forgive you; I will trust you, and thank Heaven I have found one at last in whom I can place trust," said the miner impressively.

CHAPTER XVIII.

LYING IN AMBUSH.

BACK on the trail from Texas went Dashing Charlie Emmett, but not alone. With him was Captain Dick Markham, most anxious indeed to meet his brother once more and to show him that he held in his heart no enmity against him.

Markham had taken his three best horses, and two of the three were used as pack-animals, for all to make them comfortable on the long trail had been loaded on the animals—Beatrice superintending the packing, aided by old Aunt Cloe.

During his absence Captain Markham ordered Mustang Walter to keep a couple of his men constantly on the scout for danger, and to have his troop of cowboys ready at a minute's call should they be needed.

Along the trail the two men rode, Dashing Charlie the guide, and as the pack-animals carried all the extra weight, their own riding-horses had not too much to bear.

They camped late, and pushed on early each morning, making a long stop in the middle of the day, so as to divide the marching time with three rests.

At last they began to near their destination, and Dashing Charlie became quiet and more watchful.

"They are watching for us, I know, sir; for, though I evaded them on my way to Texas, they soon found that I was gone, and where I went," he said.

He had told Captain Markham of the fate of the six men who had before attempted the mission, and that the Mounted Marauders would surely lie in wait for them.

"There are a score of trails to the river, Captain Markham, so they will not attempt to guard all of them: but beyond the river there are only three trails, and these they will ambush."

"If so, how are we to get through?" quietly asked the ranchero.

"Well, sir, my plan is to match cunning with cunning. I believe they will simply place a lookout near the river to see which trail we take."

"Well?"

"There will be nothing to be gained by Muello in taking his whole band near the stream, for by doing so he will leave the other trails unguarded on which he might miss his usual game."

"What will he do, think you?"

"Leave a guard on each trail near the river, and have him ride with all haste and report that we have passed. The trails being winding, he can see us go by, then reach his horse at some convenient place and go on to report us."

"And how can we outwit them?"

"I have not yet fully decided, sir, but we will do it, mark my words."

"I have every faith in your doing so, Emmett, and I am in your hands, so command me," answered the ranchero.

They were now approaching the river, and Dashing Charlie became as cautious as an Indian.

He did not go by the trail to the ford, but dismounting, made a flank movement and came up the bank; then he moved back and called to Captain Markham to advance with the horses, which he did. The river was forded, and after some deliberation the scout took the right-hand trail, the nearest one to the miner's cabin.

They rode slowly along, Dashing Charlie keeping the closest watch upon the trail, until suddenly he halted.

"We have been seen by the man on the lookout, and he has gone on to report that we are coming by this trail. See, here are his tracks, where he rode in from the timber, and they show that his horse was at once put at a rapid pace."

"What will we do now, Charlie?"

"Simply return to the river and take another trail."

"And if that is guarded?"

"Then take the third."

"And should a watch be kept on that one also?"

"Dash back with all speed to this one, for the reports from the other trails will be brought in then, and the chief will be so confused as to not know just where to look for us."

"But he may guard each one with a heavy force."

"I do not doubt it, if he does not lose his head on learning that we are coming by three trails."

"But if he does guard each trail, I know about where he will lie in ambush, and I know the country well enough to flank him."

"If we do happen to run upon them, then we must fight, that is all; but I have a friend here who will never let me ride into an ambush."

"Who do you mean?"

"My horse."

"Ah!"

"He has the instinct of a hound as well as a horse's sagacity; he scents a foe a long way off and makes his sign of it."

"Indeed?"

"Did you not notice how uneasy he got before we came to the spot where that man on the watch turned into the trail?"

"Yes, he turned his head several times and bit at you."

"It was because he was angry at my not noticing his signals of danger sooner; but I was busy keeping my eyes on the trail."

"Well, with such a man and such a horse as my guide and protector, I can only say, Dashing Charlie, I have no fear of results," said the ranchero, earnestly.

CHAPTER XIX.

OUTLAWS ON THE WATCH.

"THEY have passed, Captain Muello, on the northern trail."

So said one of the three men sent by Chief Muello, the Mexican, to guard the trails branching off from the river and leading into the mining country at three different points.

"On the northern trail, you say?" asked the outlaw chief, rising from his hammock, where he had been taking a *siesta* after a hearty dinner.

"Yes, chief."

"How many of them?"

"Two."

"Who were they?"

"One was the scout, Dashing Charlie, and the other was a man with a scarred face."

"That is the man I seek, for his face is scarred by burns, I have heard."

"How near were they to you?"

"They passed within thirty feet, sir, and I could have lariated one of them."

"When was this?"

"This morning early, sir."

"And you came on at full speed?"

"Yes, sir, I did not spare my horse, as you see, and they were riding slowly, having two pack-animals."

"I am sorry now that I did not guard the trails with my men nearer the river, for we

could have captured those men where you saw them."

"Easily, chief."

"Well, we have several hours before nightfall yet, so can readily reach the trail and get into ambush; but I hardly believe they will come on to-night, but go into camp."

"Tuye doubtless will camp, sir for they did not appear to suspect any danger."

"No one can ever tell what that Dashing Charlie suspects," growled the chief, and then he placed his bullet to his lips and blew the call of "Boots and Saddle."

In five minutes the camp was broken up and the men were ready to move, the pack-animals being loaded and the men mounted.

Just as they rode down the canyon, Muello at their head, the sound of flying hoofs came to their ears and into sight dashed a horseman.

He was splendidly mounted, but his horse was covered with foam and when he drew rein panted like a hard-run bound.

The chief recognized the man who had gone to take his post upon the middle trail leading from the river.

"Well, Sanchez, what news have you?"

"They have passed, señor."

"Who have passed?"

"The scout, Dashing Charlie, and a pard, with two led horses."

"The man with the scout had a badly-scarred face that looked as though he had been burned."

"You were upon the middle trail?"

"Yes, señor."

"When was this?"

"This morning toward noon."

"You are sure?"

"Yes, Señor, Chief."

"And then?"

"I rode on here with all speed, señor, for see, my horse is half-dead."

"They were still coming?"

"Yes, señor."

"Fast?"

"Very slow."

"How near to them were you?"

"About twenty feet, señor, for I was in a tree on the side of the trail."

"Well, something turned Dashing Charlie back from the northern trail and he returned and took the middle one, so that is the one we are to guard."

"Come, men, we ride toward the middle trail, and be ready for them."

Away dashed the chief at a gallop, his men following, and for several miles they rode along at the same rapid pace.

But suddenly the chief drew rein, and a warning signal from him sent the men to cover.

Then was heard the rapid clatter of hoofs approaching, and a moment after there came into view his horse at full speed, the third man who had been sent by the chief to watch one of the trails.

The chief rode out of cover into view, and the coming horseman drew to a quick halt and saluted, while he said hastily:

"They passed on the southern trail, Chief Muello, three hours ago."

"Who did?"

"Dashing Charlie and a comrade, with two led pack-horses, sir."

"Who was the man with him?"

"I do not know, chief, but his face and hands were badly scarred, it seemed from burns."

"Ah! how did you see so well?"

"I was on a cliff that they passed beneath, chief, and halted to tighten their saddle girths."

"You two men ride back on the trail for a short distance and halt," and the chief addressed the two horsemen who had been stationed on the other trails.

They obeyed, and when out of earshot the chief said:

"Now, sir, what kind of horses did Dashing Charlie and the ranchero ride?"

"Dashing Charlie was mounted upon a roan stallion, sir, the ranchero on a black."

"And the led horses?"

"One was a sorrel the other a bay."

"All right," and raising his voice, Muello called out to the Mexican:

"Ho, Sanchez, come here."

Sanchez rode back and joined his comrades and he was asked the same question, and his answer was the same.

The third man was then called up and excepting that the two riders were on the animals the others had seen led, the response was the same—the roan and the black carrying the pack-saddles.

"This is remarkable, and it shows that Dashing Charlie suspects trouble and is playing some cunning, bold game to outwit me."

"Well, he is coming by one of the three trails, that is certain, and I shall at once guard them all," and the force was quickly divided in three squads and sent to the different trails, the outlaw leader going to the one on which the scout and ranchero had been seen last.

CHAPTER XX.

A FLANK MOVEMENT.

DASHING CHARLIE sought to know just what he was about, in his effort to circumvent the outlaws.

On each trail he had noted the tracks of a horseman, and it had come in from the timber, hills, or among the rocks at a point not very far from where the main road left the river.

This was conclusive proof to him that there had been a watch upon him at each trail, and that the sentinel had ridden on with all speed to inform the chief.

Of course he knew that the three reports would bewilder the outlaws, and the result of it would be that each trail would be guarded by a force of the band.

Knowing the country as he did, Dashing Charlie was cognizant of about where the ambushers would be placed, though he could not know, of course, the exact spot.

Having bewildered the chief by letting him hear that they were coming by *three trails*, Dashing Charlie turned quickly back to the first one and pressed on hard, not sparing the horses.

He had determined to take the one he had first started on, as it was nearer, and then its rugged nature best suited his plans.

He had decided, too, the spot in his mind where the ambushers would be stationed, and even if they were a mile from it either way, it would be the same for the plan he determined to carry out.

So the horses were rushed back to the river, turned into the first trail and pushed on at a rapid pace.

Upon that trail no man would dare go by night, it was said, on account of the nature of the way, which was dangerous in the extreme.

On they rode at a gallop until darkness fell, and then they had reached the wildest part of the country.

"Now, Captain Markham, we have got to take chances, and big ones, for our lives, but not against the outlaws," said Dashing Charlie.

"How is that, Emmett?"

"Well, sir, when I escaped the road-agents on my way to your home, it was by a flank movement.

"I had gone over the trail by daylight, and decided to venture it by night.

"I did so, and went through in safety, but the chances are that all of our horses cannot do the same."

"What is to be done, Dashing Charlie?"

"Well, sir, there is a stream there in the hills which winds around to the one in the mining-valley; but it has cataracts and other obstacles in it which will have to be passed around and over, and where by daylight the danger is great, by night it is of course increased tenfold."

"And we can flank the outlaws by going this way?"

"We can."

"I am ready."

"There is another thing, sir, and that is, if we do not make it in the saddle, as a last resort we can leave our horses and continue on foot."

"All right, I am with you, go as you please."

"If we have to desert the horses, I can come back after them in a day or two by daylight."

"Even if we have to sacrifice them, it would be better than falling into the outlaws' hands."

"No, I would never desert my horse, Captain Markham, unless I was sure to get him again."

"You saw that in each instance his instinct was shown when we came upon the trails of those fellows who were watching us?"

"Yes, it was wonderful."

"He would also warn us, by showing that there were outlaws near should we go on; but not knowing how many we would have to face, we could not dash by, or if we did, it might be at the sacrifice of your life or mine."

"Now, sir, here we are at the stream."

They rode down into a torrent that went foaming along between the rocky banks.

The guide led, and the horses were borne off their feet and sent swiftly along down the current, Dashing Charlie's eyes seeming fairly to pierce the gloom ahead.

That he seemed to do so was shown by his suddenly calling out:

"Follow quickly to the right!"

Captain Markham obeyed, and as he led the two horses following by a lariat, they also came close upon the heels of the animal he rode, though the rear one was swept past, and but for the line would have gone on down.

"There is a fall not a hundred feet ahead, sir."

"I hear it; it was a close call for that rear horse."

"For all of us, sir, if I had missed my calculation," was the cool reply of the guide.

"How in all this darkness can you see?"

"I saw above, sir, for I watch the openings in the trees, as at the falls and cataracts you notice the trees grow back from the banks, giving us clear views of the stars."

"You are, indeed, taking chances, Charlie."

"It is all we can do."

"Can we not go along the shore?"

"There is no trail, sir."

"Could we not pick our way?"

"Hardly by daylight, sir, never by night."

"This stream is deep and swift, and Nature has done well for us in giving us at each cata-

ract and fall, a wide, low bank, which enables us to ride around them."

"I think we can make it all right; but we must give the horses a good rest at each halting-place."

"Are there many of these falls and cataracts?"

"Fully a dozen, Captain Markham, which we have to ride around in our flank movement."

"The stream is our only way now, sir, and there is no retracing our course," was the response of Dashing Charlie, and his manner was calm, his voice unmoved by the dangers they had to face.

CHAPTER XXI.

A CLOSE CALL.

THAT the horses felt the strain upon them, in the swimming and danger, was shown by the unwillingness of all but Dashing Charlie's well-trained animal to enter the stream again.

But once more they did so and down the current they swept, the trees overlapping above them over the narrow stream, causing a darkness that was intense there in that wild gorge.

Another time the stream widened, the stars were visible and the guide headed for the shore, this time on the left bank.

They reached it more readily than before, and the ride around the cataract was a long one of over half a mile.

Then they came to rugged, impassable rocks once more, and so took to the water again.

So it went on, now and then a close call being made of being swept by the landing.

Once it was Dashing Charlie himself, then Captain Markham, and several times each the led horses.

But the guide at last said:

"One more landing is before us and it is the last, and, I may add, the most dangerous."

"Then we stick to the land, and if the way is too rugged we can leave the horses and go afoot."

"I follow your lead, Dashing Charlie, would follow it anywhere," was the confident response of the ranchero.

As though conscious that the worst struggle was before them, the horses hung back from entering the stream again, even the splendid animal of the guide requiring urging.

It was a long swim this time, the current was wilder, the bends in the stream sharper and more frequent, and at times they were hurled along with a terrible speed.

At last light began to show in the rifts overhead, the stream widened, the trees were further back from the shore, and Dashing Charlie called out sharply:

"We land on the left bank."

"Now head for it!"

His own horse was struggling with the swiftly-flowing current, and swimming toward the shore.

But the animal ridden by Captain Markham could make no headway.

"Throw me the end of the lariats of the led horses."

"Quick! or you are lost!" cried Dashing Charlie.

There were coils in the ranchero's hands, and he obeyed.

Charlie caught them skillfully, and then came the cry:

"Quick! spring from your horse and let him go!"

This the ranchero did, gaining momentum from rising in the saddle to do so.

Away was whirled his horse, and the other two swept around quick, held by Dashing Charlie, who held the lariats, for his own animal now had a firm footing.

"Catch hold of the rear horse and hold for your life!"

"I must let the other horse go!" cried Dashing Charlie.

The ranchero tried to catch at the mane of the animal as he was being swept away, but missed it, and succeeded in catching him by the tail.

Then by him swept the other horse after his own.

But Dashing Charlie urged his own horse hard, and he reached more solid footing, and dragged the other animal after him, and which also gained a foothold.

Instantly Dashing Charlie threw himself from his saddle, and his strong grasp was upon the arm of the ranchero.

"I have my footing now, thanks to you, Charlie," cried Captain Markham, as he staggered ashore, and the fate that he had so barely escaped was shown by a wild, almost human cry from the two horses as they were hurled into the cataract, and that went over the falls not a hundred feet away.

"Poor fellows; but better that they should go than ourselves by far," said Dashing Charlie.

"Yes, and I missed sharing their fate only by the closest of calls."

"You saved my life, Dashing Charlie, for had I not sprung from my horse, I would have gone, and had you not taken the head-lines, it would have been the same."

"Yes, that was the closest call of my life, by long odds."

"Well, we have two horses left, and as we

will have to walk now, it will make no difference that you have no saddle."

"In fact, I fear we will have to desert the horses; but we will not if it can be possibly helped."

After quite a long rest they started on the way, which was very rugged and unsafe foot-ing.

They led the horses and but slow progress was made, as an hour passed and they had gone but a couple of miles.

But by going cautiously they at last managed to reach the end of the wild canyon and come out into the valley.

"That saved us ten miles at least, coming by way of the stream, and we have flanked the outlaws completely," said Dashing Charlie, as they came out into an open space, revealing a broad valley before them.

"Well, that is a triumph indeed," answered the ranchero.

"It is just eleven o'clock, and some three miles from here is your brother's cabin."

"We will mount now, and a rapid gallop will warm the horses up after their chilling in the cold waters."

"You take my saddle and I'll rig up a blanket for myself, for I am used to riding any way."

But this Captain Markham would not hear to, so a blanket was made to serve as his saddle, and mounting, they rode on across the valley at a lively pace, a distant light here and there breaking into view to show where was the home of some miner.

CHAPTER XXII.

GIVEN THE SLIP.

CHIEF MUELLO, the Mexican, soon had his men stationed along the different trails, leading into the mining valley.

Each trail ran through a wild country, generally following ranges and valleys in the mountains, and it was upon these that the outlaws carried on their lawless work at different times.

Knowing the country perfectly they could cross from trail to trail, and by keeping in the mountains elude all pursuit.

They had no camp that was known, other than a daily or nightly one, the chief preferring to live in tents the year through and by keeping a number of extra horses load them with the baggage of his camp.

In this way he was much harder to find, or pursue, than had he had a regular retreat or stronghold, for it was a case of "here to-day and gone to-morrow" with him.

When he set his three bands divided upon the trails, after what his men had said of Dashing Charlie's coming by each trail, he had kept with himself the pack-horses and camp equipage.

He had taken too the trail upon which the guide had started, but had branched off from to go back to the first one.

This trail he knew could readily be followed by night, the second one being not an easy one to pursue in the darkness, while the third was most dangerous, except in broad daylight.

Thinking that Dashing Charlie, having made a blind of going the other ways, would stick to the last one, holding on through the night, he went on this one himself to place his ambush.

A good camp was found for his men, and with eight of his best outlaws at his back he sat down on the trail to await the coming of the two men whom he so longed to get into his power.

His men were ordered not to harm the riders, but to kill their horses and lasso the guide and the ranchero. They were stationed at good points for the carrying out of this order and then all being in readiness there was nothing to do but to wait.

This they did through the long hours of the night.

The dawn coming it was decided that the men had camped for the night and would soon be along.

So the outlaws remained in position still.

There had no word come from the other ambishers on the next trails and this proved that the two men had not passed along elsewhere.

The trails were some six miles apart at the points where the ambishers were stationed, and entered the mining valley with a stretch of country between the southern and northern roads of twenty-five miles.

The day was passing on toward noon before the chief began to feel that the victims had in some way eluded him.

He at once dispatched couriers to the other two bands, telling them to move along the trails back to the river noting well the result.

His own force was set going and at last came to where the guide had turned back, for the tracks were plainly visible. Pushing rapidly on the party came out where the three trails branched off from the river and the trio of bands met there.

They compared notes with the result of discovering that Dashing Charlie had taken the trail he had originally started upon.

This they followed at a gallop up to the point where the guide had turned from the trail.

The tracks showed well that the four horses

had entered the stream, and the outlaws stood agast, for they well knew the dangers of that wild torrent.

"He has gone to his death, chief," said one.

"Not Dashing Charlie, for he is not a man to commit suicide."

"No, he knows what he is about, and we must follow him afoot."

"Go into camp here, men, and ten of you follow me."

They obeyed and the party struggled on over the rocks.

It was desperately hard work, climbing and falling, staggering and slipping; but at last they came to the spot where Dashing Charlie had made his first landing.

But the shores were a solid rock there and even the best trailers with the outlaw captain could find there no trace of a trail.

"Well, they have either landed here, or have gone over that fall, that is certain," said the chief.

It was no use to struggle on further, but the chief would not give it up until he had made a more thorough search.

So they went on to the next landing, and still no trace was visible from across the stream, and no man had the temerity to swim across to examine more closely.

Back then to their horses they went, arriving utterly worn out and just as darkness fell.

They had then to go into camp and await the dawn, for the chief and all were completely fagged out by their night's loss of rest and day of hard toil.

With the dawn of the following day, Muello, the Mexican, started for the high mountain ranges again with his whole outfit.

He had his favorite camping-places, and thither he went.

"Now, men, that fellow, Dashing Charlie, has given us the slip."

"If he has, then the men I have sentenced to death must die."

"Now I go to see if he has reached the mining-camps, for if so the fortune has been lost to us which we have worked so hard to get."

With this for his men to ponder over, Muello mounted his horse, and rode away in the twilight to play the spy himself in the mining-camps.

CHAPTER XXIII.

AFTER LONG YEARS.

I WILL now return to the scene in the cabin of the dying miner, when Racket Rob threw himself upon his knees before Matthew Markham, and implored him not to drive him from him, to trust him.

He had wronged the miner bitterly in the past, and had been his foe still in the mines; but Matt Markham could not argue otherwise than that a man who had sought forgiveness for his sins, confessed freely his wrong-doing, would be sincere, and the best one to trust under the circumstances.

He was peculiarly situated, was the miner.

A very rich man, with all of his hard-earned gold hidden away, surrounded by foes who sought to rob him of it, and in a dying condition, it was hard indeed for him to know whom to trust in these his last moments.

His mind tortured by the story brought to him about Dashing Charlie, and driven to be suspicious of every one, he knew not what to do.

Then, too, he was drawn to Robert Brackett from the fact that they had been boys together in the long ago.

He was in that condition, with the sands of life running fast away, that he could forgive his worst foe, when that foe carried his memory back to the days of childhood, recalling the scenes and faces of the past.

Could Robert Brackett fail him again, could he be treacherous to him, a dying man, especially when he would be so well cared for in a financial way, for Matt Markham intended to pay the man well for his services.

So it was that he forgave him and expressed joy in the thought that he had at last found a man whom he could trust.

"I am happy now, Robert, for I now know that if one I sent on a mission fails me, you will be here to carry out my last wishes, my last commands."

"As I would the dying request of my mother, Matt, for I, too, am happy in having been forgiven by you."

"I wish to atone for the past by doing some deed of good for you, so let me stay near you and tenderly care for you as long as you may live."

"I will, Robert; but it will not be very long that I shall trouble you."

"Don't speak so, old friend."

"I mean it, for I know it."

"Let me tell you that I am swiftly slipping out of life."

"But let me not delay in telling you that I have made my niece, Beatrice Markham, my heiress."

"Her child!"

"Yes, Robert, the daughter of our old love, whom my brother Dick won and wedded."

"It was better so, perhaps, for he saved her from the flames that night in—"

"Don't speak of that awful night, please, Matt."

"Forgive me, I will not again."

"But Beatrice is dead—"

"Dead?"

"Oh yes, she died in Texas, where my brother went and built up a home for himself as a ranchero."

"He dwells there now, he and his little Beatrice."

"This is all I know; but I have written my will leaving all to her, to little Beatrice, and I sent one to my brother's home to ask him to come to me here, to be with me in my dying hours."

"But will he come?"

"Heaven only knows if he will get my message; but you are here to carry out my wishes."

"I will, I will."

"To see that Beatrice gets my fortune."

"But have you any fortune, Matt, for I never believed that you had ever dug more than a living out of your mine?"

"Oh, yes, much more, much more, for I have hidden away a very large fortune, or it seems so to me now."

"Some thousands, doubtless?"

"Many, many thousands."

"Indeed?"

"Yes, for though I have no way of knowing the exact amount, I can guess pretty well that it will be a fortune of nearly, or quite two hundred thousand dollars in gold that I will leave my

Racket Rob almost sprung from his chair at this, and to hide his emotion rose and threw another log of wood upon the fire, while he said in a quiet way:

"She deserves it all, for she is her child and Dick's, whom I so wronged."

"But I had no idea, Matt, that you had become a man of riches."

"Yes, I struck it rich."

"You did indeed, old pard, and I congratulate you."

"Not me, for I can never enjoy a dollar of it, my friend, only in that I can give it to my niece."

"But let me tell you that I wish you to carry out my plans, should the last moment arrive and my brother not be here, my messenger having gone astray."

"I will do all in my power, Matt."

"I feel that, and let me tell you, Robert, for the sake of our old friendship and of yourself, for I wish you to become a different man, I will leave to you a nice little sum, as much as ten thousand dollars, to set you square with the world, and—"

"Oh, Matt!"

"I mean it, for that sum will enable you to lead a different career, to begin life anew."

"I will, I will!"

"You will have to be the executor of my will, so can take your share out of the gold I leave, and the balance my niece must have."

"She shall, I pledge you my word, Matt, so now tell me where to find this hidden goldmine, for— Ha! who is there?"

A knock resounded at the door of the cabin, and white and trembling Racket Rob sprung to his feet, while distinctly came the words:

"Ho, Pard Markham, open your door, for I have returned, and come not alone."

CHAPTER XXIV.

MISSING.

THE voice that rung out sharply in the air, when the miner called feebly to know who was there, was that of Dashing Charlie Emmett.

It was after midnight, and the hours that had passed were unnoticed by the miner, who had been dwelling in the past from the memories recalled by the coming to him there, in his lonely home, of Robert Brackett.

He had been so accustomed to wearing away the long hours of the night alone, that time had not been counted.

The miner fairly quivered with excitement at the sound of the guide's voice.

What did it mean? Had he really gone on his mission, and were his words that he was not alone, to be interpreted into his having brought Richard Markham with him?

He had been almost content with his meeting Robert Brackett, and a short while more would have divulged the secret he held of his hidden treasure, for it had come to Matthew Markham that he was simply hanging on to life from hope deferred, hope to yet accomplish his last act on earth as he wished.

Now, as he heard that voice, he trembled with suppressed feeling and could utter no word.

His tongue clove to the roof of his mouth.

And there stood Racket Rob the very picture of despair.

He seemed like one dealt a stunning blow.

His eyes were starting, his form shaking as with a chill and his face was as livid as a corpse.

He appeared without the power to move, and stood gazing toward the miner with a pitiful look upon his face.

At last as a tender knock came he sprung toward the miner and cried:

"Matt, for God's sake do not trust that man!"

"It is not Dashing Charlie but his Double!"

"Ha! say you so?" cried the miner with sudden energy.

"Yes, it is his Double."

"The Double of Dashing Charlie he is, if he is alone."

"What do you mean?" gasped Racket Rob.

"He is Dashing Charlie himself if he is not alone."

"Who is with him?"

"My brother Dick."

Racket Rob groaned and staggered back, while again came a knock and louder than before, followed by the words:

"Come, old pard, wake up and let us in, for I am back from Texas and your brother is with me."

"Quick! open the door, Rob, for it is Dashing Charlie, and he brings my brother with him."

"Quick! open the door for I have not the strength."

Racket Rob sprung toward the door and grasped an ax that stood there.

A strange light gleamed in his eyes as he turned them upon the dying miner and then upon the door.

But he shook his head, let go the handle of the ax and then slowly unbarred the door.

The wind blew it open, hiding him behind it, and in strode Dashing Charlie.

He strode directly toward the cot of the miner, and as he did so, in through the open door came Richard Markham.

"See, my old friend, I am back again and your brother is with me," said the scout.

The miner gave a cry of delight and stretched forth his hands which Dick Markham at once grasped while he dropped on his knees by the side of the cot.

"My poor Matt, you are indeed ill, and glad am I that I came to you."

"But I am all wet so you must not touch me, nor shall I stand so near you," said Richard Markham in a voice that was full of emotion.

"I will see to the horses, Captain Markham, and upon my return we will have some supper," said Dashing Charlie as he turned to go.

But a cry from Richard Markham caused him to stop suddenly.

"See! he is gasping! my God! he has a hemorrhage," he said as he saw the red current of life force its way through his lips.

"I am forgiven, Dick, my brother!" came in faint tones.

"All, everything and gladly," was the answer.

"Thank God! but let me tell you that Beatrice, your child, is my heiress, and one thousand goes to our noble friend here whom I doubted and ask forgiveness of him, for he has a Double."

"I a Double?"

"Yes, he was here after you left, saying that he had lost the papers I gave him."

"My dying eyes tell me now that it was not you, but your Double."

"And Robert Brackett is there—see he came to me with a lie on his lips, for I see all now, I read his false heart as it is—see, he is there behind the door, and but for your coming he would have known all; I would have trusted him with my secret, for he sought forgiveness of me and I forgave him, even as you now forgive me, Dick, my brother."

The miner spoke with great difficulty, the blood oozing from between his lips the while.

But his every word was distinctly heard by his brother and the scout, and Dashing Charlie, at the mention of Racket Rob's name, sprung toward the door.

It was still open, and glancing behind it the guide saw that there was no one there.

"Poor fellow! his mind is wandering," he said.

"No, no, he is there! he is there! no! he has gone, for he fled at sight of you."

Out of the door bounded Dashing Charlie in pursuit, while Richard Markham turning again to his brother found him slipping rapidly out of life.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE DEAD MINER.

As the scout disappeared through the open door, out into the darkness, he drew it to after him, and at once sought to accustom his eyes to the change from the bright light within.

He listened attentively the while and it seemed to him that he heard rapidly retreating steps.

He caught the direction from whence came the sound and started off like a deer in pursuit.

But a rapid run of several hundred yards brought him to a halt, and again he listened.

He heard no sound save the sighing of the wind among the pines and the ripple of a running stream near by.

"It is useless to search further now, and I may be needed up at the cabin."

"Yes, I will go after Old Rhubarb, to see if he cannot help the poor man, give him a few days' longer lease on life to be with his brother."

So saying Dashing Charlie returned rapidly to the cabin.

There stood the horses where he had hitched them, and he was about to stake them out in the little pasture-ground near the cabin when he thought that he would need his own animal to go after Old Rhubarb, so he once more entered the humble mountain dwelling.

There was no sound in the cabin as he softly opened the door save a deep sob from the lips of a strong man.

There knelt Richard Markham, his arms thrown out over the prostrate form of his brother.

As he heard the step behind him he turned, arose and said softly:

"He has gone."

"Dead?"

"Yes, he breathed his last five minutes ago."

"It is better so, for he was a great sufferer."

"I am sure of it, mentally and physically."

"Peace to his memory."

"Amen!"

Then the scout stepped forward and gently folded the hands upon the breast and drew over the upturned face a blanket.

"Did you see Robert Brackett?" asked Richard Markham in a whisper.

"No, I hardly believe he was here."

"Yes he was, for Matt told me enough to prove that, and I am sure he was playing some bold game at the last to get the better of my brother."

"I only wish that I could have caught him here."

"So do I, for I feel revengeful toward Robert Brackett."

"See! this is his work, and this," and the ranchero pointed to his disfigured face and hands.

"And then too he took human life in setting that house on fire, sought to let my wife perish in the flames, as well as poor Matt and myself."

"Yes, I feel revengeful toward Robert Brackett."

"Well, he must steer clear of us while here; but did your brother tell you aught of his wishes?"

"He said that he made my daughter his heiress, that you knew where to find some papers, and that his wish was to be buried here in the center of his cabin, which was then to be set on fire and burned to the ground."

"So he told me."

"I shall do as he wished."

"Oh, yes, it would not be just to him to do otherwise."

"Now when shall you bury him?"

"On the morrow; but now let us seek rest."

"You must have some supper first, for we both need food as well as rest."

The scout then led the horses away and staked them out, and having prepared some supper the two men wrapped themselves in their blankets to seek a few hours of repose.

The sun was shining brightly when they awoke, and after cooking breakfast they began preparations for the burial of the miner.

"I suppose I must let the miners know, Captain Markham, for many of them thought a good deal of your brother."

"Do in all things as you deem best, Dashing Charlie."

"And may I ask if your brother told you about the hiding-place of his treasure?"

"He said when I buried him here in the cabin the secret would be known."

"Well, sir, there will be a large sum, from what he said to me, enough to load several pack-mules, and in carrying it to where you desire to have it, let me say that you will require a guard of men, half a dozen or more, whom I had better pick out from among the miners."

"Certainly, for those outlaws will surely make an attack on us."

"Without doubt, sir."

"And you will still be my guide and defender back to my home, Dashing Charlie?"

"If you so wish, sir."

"With all my heart I wish it, Emmett, and I will see that you are well rewarded, though well I know you do not act from any desire for recompense."

"No indeed, sir, for I may as well tell you now that I am in Government pay, and am here upon a special mission, sent by the commanding officer at Fort Blank; but this is a secret."

"I shall hold your confidence inviolate, Dashing Charlie."

"But now let me ask you to go to the camps and make all preparations for my brother's burial, inviting the miners to attend if you deem best, and selecting the men you judge to be the most fitting ones to act as guards to this treasure on the way home, and as many as you think right."

"Also purchase pack-mules, and do in all things as your judgment dictates."

"I will keep watch here until your return."

After some further conversation together, Dashing Charlie went out, mounted his horse and rode away upon the trail to the mining-camps, considerably impressed by all that had taken place.

Before going he warned Captain Markham to keep well on the alert for any visitor that might

approach the cabin, for he knew not whom to trust.

Hardly had he been gone half an hour when a visitor rode up to the miner's cabin.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THWARTED.

WHEN he beheld Dashing Charlie and the ranchero enter Matt Markham's cabin, Racket Rob was in mortal terror for his life.

The moment that they passed on toward the cot where lay the dying man, unseen by them, he darted out of the door and sprung away in the darkness.

At first his legs almost gave way under him, and he fairly reeled from fright, expecting a shot in the back from the unerring revolver of the scout.

But as he got away from the bright light, he gained courage and ran with increased speed.

He kept up his pace for some time, until he heard his name called from behind.

"Ho, Racket Rob, don't be a fool!

"No one is after you but me, and I am not fleet enough to overtake you."

Then the man stopped short with the remark:

"It is you, is it?"

"Yes."

It was the same man who had gone with him toward the miner's cabin some hours before, and who had said he would wait without, to be on hand if needed.

In his fright the vagabond had forgotten really that he had a companion near.

When Racket Rob, however, had darted out of the cabin, the fellow went away, too, like the wind, feeling very confident that it would be safest to make his escape, too.

"Well, Doc, it's all up with us now!" parted Racket Rob.

"So I guessed when I saw those two men arrive and recognized one as Dashing Charlie, curse him."

"Yes, a thousand curses upon him, for he has ruined us for life," hissed Racket Rob.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that we lose a quarter of a million dollars, that is all."

"Not yet, for Providence helps those who help themselves."

"Well, I played my game to win and won."

"You palavered so long that they came and headed you off."

"What could I do?"

"Get his secret, call me in and let the end come quick, then hide the secret about the mine until we could get away with the gold."

"That was our compact."

"I know it Doc."

"But you dilly-dallied until you lost all."

"Not so fast, Doc, for I don't want to be blamed when I hasn't done anything."

"That is just it, you have done nothing to win."

"I did; but come, this is no place for us, so let us get our horses and go to your cabin."

"No, we'll go to yours."

"All right."

They were soon mounted and as they rode along the vagabond said:

"Now, I played my cards well, for I even wept tears of repentance."

"I tell you it was grand, and my acting got a forgiveness from Matt Markham for me."

"It took a long time to bring him around, for I had to go slow, had to be mighty cautious, and when at last I got him to trust me wholly, I had it all my way."

"He was just beginning to talk of his treasure, and to tell me he wished me to carry out his last wishes, when that knock came on the door."

"I declare it fairly froze my heart's blood, Doc, for I saw in my very grasp nearly a quarter of a million in money."

"Bosh!"

"That's what he said he had in clean yellow metal."

"I don't believe it."

"He was dying, Doc, and there is an unwritten law which says a dying man cannot lie."

"It's a lie to say so, for I know of dying men who have lied for revenge, to save the honor of some loved one, yes, for a score of reasons."

"Well, Matt Markham had no call to lie."

"He said he had nearly a quarter of a million?"

"He did."

"Then the more fool you for letting it slip through your fingers."

"I could not help it, Doc; but he told me he would put all in my keeping for his heiress."

"Who?"

"His niece, who is his brother's child, and living in Texas."

"It was the brother whom Dashing Charlie brought with him."

"The deuce take him!"

"Oh! if you had only been quicker in what you did."

"I did all that I could, and I could have done no more."

"When they came I opened the door and crouched behind it."

"I saw that Matt Markham suspected me, and

it came across my mind and into my heart to kill him."

"Why did you not do it?"

"In the first place I forgot, when I had the intention, my wounded arm."

"It was my wish to kill Matt Markham, then open the door and let the two men have it as they came it."

"But I knew that Dashing Charlie might not first enter, and that he was as quick as a cat in his movements."

"My hand was upon the handle of an ax to do the work, when I knew I was hampered by my wounded arm, and I thus shrank back out of sight and when they entered darted out of the door."

"You know the rest."

"Yes, and a bad rest it is."

"I could do no more."

"No, I do not think you could, now I hear all the circumstances; but did those men see you?"

"No."

"Then go to bed when you reach your cabin and I'll say you are very ill, that the miner was raving in delirium in saying you were there."

"I'll go to the cabin in the morning, for there is no suspicion against me, and I'll plan to get that for me yet for us, Rob."

"I am with you in anything, Doc."

"I believe you."

"We were thwarted by circumstances beyond our control, Racket Rob, but we will yet win, mark my words on it, my pard."

"I have faith in you, Doc," was the answer, as the two dismounted before the cabin of Racket Rob.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE TRAITOR DOCTOR.

THE visitor who entered the cabin of the dead miner, Matt Markham, was an individual known to the reader, though not yet described.

He wore blue glasses with gold frames, under the plea that his eyes were weak, and no one had seen him when he was not as close shaven as a priest.

His sandy hair was worn long and he had an ecclesiastical, sanctimonious look about him that gave one who could read human nature well the idea that he was a wolf in lamb's wool.

He dressed in a suit of gray homespun, had his pants stuck in his boots and under his sack coat he wore a belt of arms, though no one had ever gotten a glimpse of them.

A black sombrero with brim pulled down sheltered his head, and altogether he was an odd looking genius.

Such was Doctor Quick, or Old Rhubarb, and he was coining money out of the miners.

He was an alarmist in all cases where he was called in, keeping his patient in bed as long as possible, and always made the unfortunate victim believe he was desperately ill, or wounded, as the case might be, and then show that his great skill alone saved him from death.

But candidly speaking Doctor Quick was a good surgeon and excellent physician, withal he was a grand rascal with it.

He went to the cabin of the dead miner the next morning, and was met by Captain Markham.

"Ah! a stranger here?" he said raising his eyebrows with pretended surprise.

"I am Richard Markham, sir, the brother of Miner Matt Markham who lies dead there."

"Dead! my patient dead?"

"You are his physician, then, sir?"

"I was, and most deeply attached did I become to him."

"Dead, poor, poor pard."

"This was sudden, very sudden, and unexpected," and the doctor walked up to the cot, drew back the blanket and gazed at the face of the dead man, while in a professional way he placed his finger upon the pulse and leant his ear to listen if there was any fluttering of the heart.

"It should not be unexpected to you, sir, if you were his physician, for a man so ill as was my brother might be expected to die at any moment."

"True, sir, true; but I had so hoped he would linger for some time yet."

"You see we became the best of friends," and the doctor wiped a tear from his eye.

"But I must not yield to my emotions, sir, I who see death in its worst shape every day."

"Allo me, my dear sir, to introduce myself."

"I am Zekiel Quick, M. D."

"I am glad to meet you, Doctor Quick, and to thank you for your kindness to my brother."

wish to leave in your hands for my niece, all that I possess, and you are to see that she gets it.

"Pay my burial expenses, my dear pard, and take out your own account, which at two visits every twenty-four hours, day and night, for many months, must be quite a large sum."

"But I do not begrudge it to you, Quick, not I, for you have earned it."

"When you have taken your money, every dollar then goes to my niece; but I will tell you all about it when you come to-morrow."

"So he said, my dear sir, and now I have come to find him dead."

"It is so sad, such a blow to me."

"But are you alone, Mr. Markham?"

"I came with the guide whom my brother sent after me, sir."

"His name is Dashing Charlie, and he has now gone to the camps to make known to the miners that my brother is dead."

"Ah, indeed," and Doctor Quick looked disappointed.

Then he said:

"I am sorry I did not come back last night, but I was detained at the bedside of a man named Racket Rob."

"A worthless fellow he is, but I never neglect any one whom I can serve, Mr. Markham, rich or poor."

"He got a pistol-shot some time ago, and he has a very high fever, so I could not leave him to return to your brother last night."

"I am very, very sorry."

"Do not reproach yourself, sir, for you could have been of no service to him, as he was too far gone."

"But you say that this man you call Racket Rob is very ill?"

"Yes, sir, the result of fever following a gun-shot wound, you know."

"Has he not been away from his cabin of late?"

"Not for days, sir, not for days."

"Could it not be possible that he left without your knowledge, Doctor Quick?"

"No, my dear sir, for he is raving in delirium, and has a very high fever."

"It is a chance if I pull him through or not."

"Then my poor brother's mind was wandering, for he said to me that this man Racket Rob was here last night."

"He is a man whom we both knew in the long ago, and perhaps it is well that he is ill, for I would not wish him to cross my path again."

"Well, sir, you may look upon him as a man with a slight chance against death, and poor Matt's mind was wandering to say that he had seen him here; it was going back to memories of the past— Oh! here come some of the miners now," and a party of miners were seen coming up the trail to the cabin.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A DANGEROUS RUMOR.

THE ranchero glanced out of the cabin door, at the words of the doctor, and beheld a crowd of a dozen or more miners.

They were coming up the trail to the cabin, to attend the burial of Miner Matt Markham, having been notified of his death by Dashing Charlie.

A great deal of interest attached to the lone miner's burial, for he was known to possess gold in large quantities, and then all had a desire to see this stranger who came as his brother.

Many felt deep disappointment that there was any heir to put in an appearance, for it was hoped that there would be a game of grab for the spoils.

But the guide had ridden through the town, telling the men to assemble at Miner Matt's cabin, or those who wished to see him laid in the grave, and nearly all had at once laid aside their picks and shovels and started for the isolated home in Good Luck Canyon.

Having made a few purchases at the store, Dashing Charlie started on his way back to the cabin.

He had met a number of miners who had seen this Double of his, and quietly gleaned from them all the information he could regarding him.

That they believed that it was he whom they had seen he saw at a glance, and so understood how much like him his Double was.

Returning to the cabin, Dashing Charlie found gathered there several hundred miners, all of them discussing very openly Miner Matt's sudden taking off, the money he had left, and the arrival of his brother.

That many regarded the ranchero as a fraud there was no denying.

Some one there was who had gone through the crowd, making known that the Texan was not Matt's brother, and it was furthermore hinted that Dashing Charlie had not gone to the Lone Star State after Richard Markham.

It was said that he had been seen in the camps only a short while before, and so could not have gone to Texas.

It was asserted that the talk about Dashing Charlie having a Double was all nonsense.

That the man seen in the camps, playing cards at Poker Paul's Den of Destiny, was none other than Dashing Charlie himself, and that

the claim that he had brought the brother of Matt Markham to the cabin was false.

The man he had brought with him was a consummate fraud, one who held no claim upon the property of Matt Markham.

It was but a plot for Dashing Charlie and his confederate to get the miner's gold.

This ought not to be, and the good miners of the community should see to it that there was no fraud perpetrated.

Who was Dashing Charlie, anyway?

He pretended to be a miner, and yet who had ever seen him work in a mine?

He had no visible means of livelihood, and this went far to prove that he was a crook.

Such was the talk about the cabin when Dashing Charlie returned.

Who had spread these hints against the guide no one could exactly tell; but they were sown in good ground and were not long in bringing forth bitter fruit against Richard Markham as well as Dashing Charlie.

In that wild community it was a dangerous thing for any man to be suspected of a crime.

Many there were criminals themselves, and hence more prone to wish to see others punished for wrong-doing.

Captain Markham and Old Rhubarb had prepared the body of the dead miner for burial.

He had been dressed in his best suit, his sombrero placed upon his head, and his pick and shovel laid by his side.

The miners had come into the cabin with uncovered heads, and gazed upon the calm face of the dead.

Then they had gone out and asked where his gold was, and who knew about it.

When Dashing Charlie at last came in sight he was accompanied by the storekeeper, the blacksmith, landlord of the tavern, Poker Paul, and several others of the dignitaries of the camps, all mounted.

It did not take a second glance of Dashing Charlie's at the assembled miners to see that something was going wrong.

He hitched his horse, carried his purchases into the cabin and spoke to Captain Markham in a low tone.

He had seen angry glances cast upon him as he came through the crowd and could not understand them.

"I am back again, captain, and I got a roll of heavy canvas to wrap the body in."

"That will do, for I hardly supposed a coffin could be obtained," answered the ranchero.

Then the guide said:

"It seems that something has gone wrong."

"Do you know what it is?"

"The doctor here says that the men are greatly incensed against you and I."

"Indeed! and for what reason?"

"Let the doctor explain."

"Out with it, Doc," and Dashing Charlie said:

"Well, it's all nonsense, of course, Dashing Charlie, but you know what a border crowd is when aroused, and they swear that you have not been to Texas, that you only pretended to go, and got Mr. Markham here to join you in a fraud to get poor old Matt's gold."

"Is this true, Quick?" and Dashing Charlie's eyes flashed dangerously as he asked the question, while he glanced quickly over the crowd, now under suppressed excitement.

"It is, Dashing Charlie, all true, for the men say you could not be here in the camps and in Texas too, and that Mr. Markham is not Matt Markham's brother, only a pal of yours who pretends to be."

"Ah! this is the situation, is it?"

"Well, it must be met face to face and in a manner that will admit of no dispute," and Dashing Charlie stepped to the door of the cabin and faced the now excited crowd of miners.

CHAPTER XXIX.

A HERO AT BAY.

THERE was a deathlike silence when Dashing Charlie faced the crowd of miners standing outside the cabin of Matt Markham.

It was an impressive scene, for he gazed into the faces of over three thousand men, many of them desperate characters.

Behind him in the cabin on his cot lay the dead form of the miner.

There at his side stood the ranchero, with Dr. Quick in the background.

"Men," and Dashing Charlie's voice was as clear as bugle-notes—"men, I believe that you all here know me."

"At least you know that I am called Dashing Charlie Emmett, that I am a scout and guide, and came to these camps to pick up an honest penny."

"We doesn't know any good of you, Dashing Charlie," cried a voice.

All started, and hands dropped upon revolver-belts.

But, instead of showing resentment, Dashing Charlie asked, with a pleasant smile:

"Do you know any bad of me, Pete Parker?"

"I do."

"Well, let me say just this to you, that I will give you a chance to prove your words, and if

you don't do it, then you have it out with me."

"I'm agreeable."

"Now, what do you know against me, Pete Parker?"

"I knows you has plotted to rob old Matt Markham of his gold."

"You lie, and you have to prove what you say; but it is just this charge, told me by Doctor Quick, that I have decided to refute."

"Yer can't deny it!" cried several voices.

"Then I can for him, for I am Matt Markham's brother," and Richard Markham stepped before the miners.

"It hain't so!"

"You is a pard!"

"You is Dashing Charlie's confid in the leetle game o' rob!"

"Yer can't bluff us, old Sear Face."

"And Dashing Charlie can't bluff us neither."

Such were the cries that arose from the crowd; but, though Richard Markham's face paled, he remained perfectly calm.

As for Dashing Charlie he still faced the crowd and said:

"Men, be reasonable and hear what I have to say."

"Then judge according to facts."

"Hear him!" came in a number of voices, and when silence was restored the scout said:

"Now, men, I have just this to say:

"I came to these camps and there are men who know me, and knew me before I came here, so I need no further proof than to say that I am a scout, guide and Indian-fighter, at present on the lookout to try and strike it rich in mining."

"The man whose dead body lies behind me, I came to nurse one night, and he asked me to go upon a mission for him."

"I accepted the offer and went."

"That mission was to go to Texas and bring back with me Richard Markham the brother of the dead miner."

"He runs a ranch in Texas, his daughter was Matt Markham's heir, and I went after him, being successful where six others had failed, five of them losing their lives in the attempt."

"I found Captain Richard Markham upon his ranch, and he returned with me, we arriving last night a short while before Matt Markham's death."

"We dodged the Mountain Marauders under Murello the Mexican, who was lying in ambush for us, and arrived in safety."

"To-day I went to the mines to call you together to the burial, and now it is said that I have plotted to get Matt Markham's money."

"It is false, and the man who says so is a liar and knows it."

"I have no more to say, except that, after the burial of Miner Markham, I am ready to hold myself responsible to any man who considers himself insulted by my words."

There were a number who cheered the words of Dashing Charlie; but others hissed and groaned and Pete Parker called out:

"See here, Dashing Charlie, will you answer some questions to clear yourself?"

"Yes, if other than you desire it."

"Answer!" came in a roar.

"What would you know, Pete Parker?"

"How many days were you going to Texas?"

"Ten."

"How long did you stay there?"

"Three days."

"How many days was yer coming back?"

"Ten."

"That's twenty-three."

"According to my arithmetic, yes."

"And yet ten days ago and a week ago you were in the camps."

"It is false."

"I have the proof."

"Give it."

"Men, I want them as seen Dashing Charlie in the camps a week and ten days ago to step out in front here."

Fully fifty men obeyed.

"Whar is it you seen him?"

"At Poker Paul's Den o' Destiny," cried a number of voices.

"Does yer deny that testimony, Dashing Charlie?"

"I do."

Hisses and groans greeted this assertion, followed by cheers.

"Men, I know what Pete Parker is driving at, and he may be honest in it, and he may not, for he is not a man I would trust under any circumstances."

"But I know, from a number I have talked with, that, since I left, a man has appeared in the camps pretending to be me."

"Now, whoever he is, I pronounce him to be a fraud, for I have not been here for over three weeks," and Dashing Charlie looked fearlessly into the faces of the crowd.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE TESTIMONY.

Who this man was, he could not surmise. He was not one to be met with every day, and he knew that few men resembled him.

This one, however, who was playing his Double, was certainly strangely like him in face, form and voice, or all those who had seen him spoke falsely for a reason of their own.

If seen in the Den of Destiny then Poker Paul must know him, and so Dashing Charlie appealed to the gambler and saloonkeeper.

"Did you see this man, Poker Paul, who professed to be me?"

"I did, Charlie."

"And you thought that I was the one you saw?"

"I did think so, Dashing Charlie; but if you say it was not you I am not the man to doubt your word, for I know you to be square as they make 'em."

Some near groaned and Poker Paul added quickly:

"I've heard dying men give sounds like that, pards."

It was a significant remark and silence followed the words.

Poker Paul was a man of peace, if peace was to be the game played, but those who had brought on a war with him had bad reason to regret it, for he was a deadly hand at close quarters.

"Did you think you saw me too. Bent Remsen?" and Dashing Charlie turned to the store-keeper of the camps.

"That was my idee, Charlie, for you come inter my lay-out and made a few purchases, telling me to slate 'em ag'in' yer."

"And you did so?"

"You bet, for your credit is good at my shanty."

"Then this man must indeed have been my very image," and Dashing Charlie wore a puzzled look.

"Jist ask ther Doc, Old Rhubarb there, if he wasn't, for he played keerds with yer," the blacksmith said.

"You saw him too?"

"Well, he come to my shop, got his horse shod all round, and told me to hang it up until another time."

"Which you did?"

"I did for a fact."

"And this man's horse, what kind of an animal did he ride?"

A l were very quiet now, for the roan stallion of Dashing Charlie was well known to every man in camp, the only horse he had with him.

"Waal, Dashing Charlie, that's just it," said Iron Ike, the blacksmith, in a puzzled way.

"What is just it, Iron Ike?"

"About that horse."

"Was it my horse?"

"Waal, if he were he-hav changed considerable."

"What do you mean?"

"I means that when I have shod your horse you had to be right there to protect me all the time from him."

"And this horse?"

"Was a roan stallion, too, but gentle as a lamb."

"I asked you what had come over him, for he didn't look quite ther same."

"You asked my Double, you mean?"

"Waal, yas."

"And what was the answer?"

"He said as how he had tamed him down."

"The doctor ought to have his say," said Pete Parker.

"Yas, give old Rhubarb a chance," others called out.

"Doctor Quick, may I ask if you too saw my Double some weeks ago in the camps?"

The doctor seemed glad to be called upon for his testimony.

He stepped quickly out of the cabin, and wheeling, faced Dashing Charlie, while he said in a measured tone:

"I saw a man whom I believe was you—you, Dashing Charlie."

"When?"

"Ten days ago."

"Where?"

"At the Den."

"Ten days ago!"

"Yes, and a week ago, too."

"At Poker Paul's?"

"Yes."

"Did you talk with him?"

"Yes, I talked with you."

"With me?"

"So I take it."

"Well?"

"We had a game together each time."

"Indeed?"

"Sure."

"Who won?"

"I believed that I did."

"You believed that you did?"

"So I said."

"And did you not?"

"I won the game."

"And got your money?"

"I got what I thought was money."

"How is that?"

"Well, all I got is counterfeit."

"What do you mean by this, Doctor Quick?"

"I mean that you paid me in counterfeit bills the amount of my winnings."

A perfect howl went up at this from the miners, and seeing his advantage, Old Rhubarb drew from his pocket a roll of crisp bank-notes, and said:

"Here is the wad, and those as know good money can examine this for themselves, for I say it is no good."

Fully a hundred men rushed forward to examine the bills, but the doctor quickly replaced them in his pocket with the cunning remark:

"No, I don't wish it to get into circulation, pards, here in the camps, for it's against the law, so go slow all of you."

The crowd looked disappointed, for many of the would-be examiners would have clung on to what they got their hands upon beyond all doubt.

"You know genuine money, Poker Paul, and so do you, Remsen, and Iron Ike, so just say if that which the doctor has is counterfeit," said Dashing Charlie.

The three men looked at the bills handed them by Old Rhubarb, and after awhile each one gave it as his opinion that the money was counterfeit.

"I told you so, Dashing Charlie, and I expect you to make it good to me right off, for there is a severe penalty hanging over the crime of passing it," said Old Rhubarb, with great dignity.

CHAPTER XXXI.

AN ABSENT WITNESS.

THERE was not the slightest doubt but that matters were going decidedly against Dashing Charlie.

If against the scout, then also against his friend the ranchero.

In that lawless community it was a very dangerous thing to be caught in the commission of a crime.

What motive had any man for playing the Double of Dashing Charlie?

What man had been seen in the camps that could do so?

These were the questions which men in that crowd asked each other.

On the other hand, men had every reason to believe that the scout sought, as they did, to get a slice at the old miner's gold.

Many a plot had been arranged to do so, and all had failed.

Now the scout came to the front with the cleverest scheme of all, that the miner had sent him after his brother, and he had brought him back with him.

Admitting that he was gone over three weeks, he yet had been seen in the camps within ten days, had bought things at a store and had them charged, had had his horse shod on credit, had played cards twice with Old Rhubarb, and paid his losses in counterfeit money.

Certainly all this looked very black for Dashing Charlie.

Accordingly it was very black for Richard Markham.

Many who had believed in Dashing Charlie began to desert him after hearing the testimony of Doctor Quick.

Captain Markham, who had felt confidence at first in Old Rhubarb, now began to dread that he was playing some deep game for his interests.

Peter Parker was very urgent in wishing to push matters against Dashing Charlie, and it needed now but a spark to cause a conflagration to break out.

"Well, Pard Dashing Charlie, fraud and counterfeiter, what have you to say now for yourself?" cried Peter Parker, in an exultant tone.

"I would like to say a few words," said Richard Markham, stepping forward, and taking his stand in the doorway by the side of Dashing Charlie.

"Well, listen to ther stranger!"

"Give him a show!"

"Shout what yer has ter say!"

Like cries were heard upon every side, and removing his hat, Captain Markham said in a manly way:

"My friends, the dead form lying upon the cot here is my brother, for my name is Richard Markham, and my home is in Texas.

"I had lost sight of my brother for years, and believed that he was dead; but thirteen days ago I was seated upon the piazza of my home, when a horseman, pursued by Indians, came in sight.

"I rallied my cowboys and went to the rescue, and we had a hot fight of it, but beat them off eventually.

"That brave horseman was my friend Emmett, here by my side, and who is known as Dashing Charlie.

"He came to me from my dying brother, asking me to come to him."

"Here is the letter he wrote me."

He handed over the letter which the Double of Dashing Charlie had said was lost in the stream.

"Ex-mine that for yourselves, you who know my brother's writing, while I go on to say that

Matt Markham was seized with a hemorrhage soon after our arrival and died in my arms.

"But he lived long enough to tell us that he had been visited by a man claiming to be Dashing Charlie, and who sought to get certain papers from him.

"He told me, too, that my daughter was to be his heir, and that in good time I would find his hidden gold."

"My brother also said that there was one in these mines who had known us in the long-ago in old Virginia, and more he could not say, for his life faded away."

"This is the truth, my friends, and the man who has represented himself to you as Dashing Charlie Emmett is a fraud."

The words of Richard Markham made a good impression, but Peter Parker at once called out:

"Can you prove that you be the brother of Matt Markham?"

"If the man to whom I referred was here he could testify to my identity, even though we are not friends but foes."

"Who is he?"

"Robert Brackett is his name, but you call him Racket Rob."

"Racket Rob is very ill and delirious," cried the doctor suddenly.

"I seen him yesterday, and he only had his arm in a sling," said one.

"Yas, he was at ther store yesterday evening late," the storekeeper said.

Captain Markham glanced quickly at Old Rhubarb, and said sternly:

"This does not agree with your story, sir."

"I tell you he is ill, has a high fever and is out of his mind."

"I insist that you bring Racket Rob here, sick or well," said Richard Markham.

"Aud I demand it, as both Captain Markham and myself are the accused," sternly said Dashing Charlie.

The doctor urged hard against it, but there were cries of fair play and at last Poker Paul and Remsen said they would go after Racket Rob.

Old Rhubarb insisted upon going, too, but Dashing Charlie pushed him back into the cabin and said:

"This is my funeral now, Old Rhubarb, but it will be yours if you attempt to leave this cabin until this case is decided for or against this gentleman and myself."

CHAPTER XXXII.

A FALSE WITNESS.

THERE were shouts for and against Dashing Charlie, at his bold act in silencing the doctor, but no one attempted to interfere, as it was a foregone conclusion in all minds that the scout and ranchero were wholly at the mercy of the crowd, when they decided to act.

So they waited in patience, and well was it for the accused that there was no liquor near, or there would have been trouble precipitated very quickly.

Having cowed the doctor by his sudden act, Dashing Charlie had very quickly dismissed him with the remark:

"I believe you now to be a wolf in sheep's clothing, Old Rhubarb, and a toothless wolf is not dangerous."

"You'll pay for this, Dashing Charlie," hissed the doctor.

"Yes, and others will pay for it, too," was the significant answer, and Dashing Charlie said something in a low tone to Captain Markham.

The latter moved toward the rear of the cabin, taking the doctor's belt of arms with him, and the latter said:

"Ah, you intend to prepare for a fight, do you?"

He was about to call out to the guard, when Dashing Charlie faced him.

What he saw in the face of the scout fairly terrified him, while he heard the low uttered words:

"You dare to speak a word, or make a sign, until I give you permission, and I'll send a bullet into your heart."

The frightened man of medicine shrunk back in silent fear, and though he saw Richard Markham gather up his own weapons and those of Matt Markham, and place them on one side of the door, he made no remark.

It was evident that the scout meant to fight if driven to it, and with his own, the ranchero's, the doctor's and the two rifles and four revolvers found in the cabin, he could make a very desperate combat of it before he was overpowered himself, while Captain Markham looked to Old Rhubarb like a man to also be an ugly foe in battle.

One hour passed before Poker Paul and Remsen returned, and they were accompanied by Racket Rob.

The latter looked white and scared, in fact might well be taken for a sick man.

But then his arm was in a sling from his wound.

Fever he had none, and his delirium was not evident.

In fact Racket Rob had intended to carry out the doctor's instructions, but Poker Paul had

very quickly given him to understand that he needed all of his wits and was only wanted to identify a man.

He was greeted with a yell as he approached, and Pete Parker at once called out:

"Pard Rob, we has a man here for you ter tell us who he is."

He was taken to the door of the cabin, and Richard Markham stepped into view and their eyes met.

"Robert Brackett, who am I?"

Racket Rob's face had turned a shade more pallid, and he had winced at sight of his old foe, while he looked strangely nervous.

Dashing Charlie was watching him with the eye of a hawk, and failed to see Doctor Quick gazing out of the door through the space between himself and Richard Markham.

The doctor however had gotten a chance, seen by only a few, to shake his head.

This signal was interpreted correctly by Brackett Rob, who said in a voice that he meant to be firm:

"How does I know, pard?"

"You know me?"

"No, I does not," and the man assumed the crude dialect of the border.

"You do not know me, Robert Brackett?"

"You is away off, pard, for I hain't Robert Brackett."

"Then you refuse to identify me?"

"I don't know yer."

"My life, and the life of this brave young man, may depend upon my recognition by you."

"Your life!"

"Yes, for I have told these men that Matheus Markham lying dead there was my brother."

"I know we were rivals in early manhood, Robert Brackett, and that we became bitter foes; but I did not believe you would refuse to recognize me whom you know in your heart to be Richard Markham."

"I does refuse, for I doesn't know yer."

"You do not know me, man?"

"Look at this hideously-scarred face, these burned hands of mine, and tell me that you do not know your own fiendish work! for your act of murder caused them."

"I tell you, men, that this man is a fugitive from justice, one who sought the life of a young girl and of my dead brother lying there and myself."

"I saved the girl at the risk of my life—see these hideous, accursed scars—and she became my wife, while this creature, this wretch in the form of a man, fled, to save his neck from the hangman's clutch, fled because others perished in that burning dwelling, and he would have suffered for his crime."

"Out upon you, Robert Brackett, for I would not save my life by the recognition of such as you."

The ranchero had worked himself up into a fever of indignation, and his bitter words of denunciation made an impression upon many present.

But the spirit of deviltry was strong in the hearts of four-fifths of those gathered there, and Peter Parker struck the key-note when he said:

"Pards, he has not been identified, and it's in order ter hang him and Dashing Charlie for the crime o' robbing the old miner of his gold."

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE DOCTOR TAKES THE LEAD.

IT certainly looked very bad for Dashing Charlie and Richard Markham.

The scene was a strange and thrilling one, for there within the cabin lay the dead miner, while those who had the right to lay him peacefully in his grave and claim that which was his, were to hunted to death by a greedy mob led on by a few cut-throats.

There were a few of the better men in the crowd who still held trust in the scout, and had been won over by the words of the ranchero.

But they were hopelessly in the minority, and were wondering what could be done to save the two unfortunate men.

Taking advantage of the words of Peter Parker, and the lull that followed, while men were preparing to act, Doctor Quick suddenly darted out of the door, at the imminent risk of his life.

He had seen Dashing Charlie turn to speak to the ranchero and tell him to prepare for the worst.

So he took quick advantage of the chance to escape, and like an arrow he shot out of the door and around the cabin corner.

A wild yell and laughter followed his escape, while Dashing Charlie muttered something very like an oath at his negligence that had allowed Old Rhubarb to get away.

Doctor Quick knew his power in that community.

He was well aware that he was the only one to call upon for aches and illness, wounds and bruises.

He felt certain that he would have been protected, even though in the power of Dashing Charlie.

It would not do to let him be hurt or killed, on any account.

So he had decided in his own mind, while he arranged for a clever scheme of his own.

He had not been heard, and he must be.

So he took up position out of sight of Dashing Charlie and the ranchero, and called out loudly:

"Hold on, pard, for I have something to say."

As though they expected to hear words of wisdom fall from his lips, the crowd looked toward him and the excitement ceased at once.

"Pards, you know me?"

It was apparent that they all did, from the cheer he received.

"Thanks, kind thanks for this expression of your sincere esteem, my friends."

Another cheer, and Old Rhubarb bowed with uncovered head, the act showing extreme baldness on the top of his cranium.

"My friends, what I have to say will not detain you long.

"You know me as a practitioner among you for several years, and I do not believe there is one of you who will say aught against the honor of Old Rhubarb, as you affectionately nickname me."

"Not a word," came with a howl.

"Now, my friends, I have been the physician in attendance upon poor old Miner Markham for long months.

"I tried to save him, but consumption is a disease you all know that claims its victims without mercy.

"So I did what I could to cheer him up in his latter days.

"He appreciated this, and having heard that his messenger, sent to his brother in Texas, had failed him, he told me that he wished to leave in my keeping the disposition of his property.

"My bill I was to take out, and also repay myself for the services rendered in disposing of his gold as he directed.

"I was to also hold out a sum to give to the poor and needy in the camps, and to treat the boys three times all round.

"Then I was to take the remainder in gold dust to his heiress, Miss Markham, of Texas.

"My friends, he was to give me further particulars this morning, for I was compelled to go upon my round of duty.

"But lo, when I returned to-day I discovered here that person you see in that cabin—"

"And whom you don't see, Doc," cried Parker Paul.

"And I don't wish to, as I am unarmed.

"But he claimed to be the brother of Matt Markham, and told me that Dashing Charlie had guided him here from Texas.

"Now mark his words, that one whom we know was here in the camps a week ago, paying his gambling debts with counterfeit money, had guided him here from Texas.

"Now, my friends, the situation is just this: that I, Zekiel Quick, M. D., is the appointed executor of the late lamented Matthew Markham, miner, and will carry out his behests as directed.

"Also, that this man, Dashing Charlie, and his confederate in guilt, came here to get possession of that fortune, and to do so by foul means.

"These men are now under the shelter of the roof that holds the dead body of their victim, and I need only say that justice should be dealt out with unsparing hand.

"Punishment for their crime I leave in your hands, and I know that you will not hesitate to visit upon them a doom commensurate with the sin they sought to commit.

"Pards, all, I leave these two men in your hands, and I know that justice will be done."

The doctor bowed low as he uttered the last words, and with a howl of rage the crowd whipped out their revolvers and moved toward the cabin.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

AGAINST TERRIBLE ODDS.

"BACK, every man of you!"

There was a ring in the voice of Dashing Charlie which there was no mistaking.

He meant to stand at bay, to fight it out against those who meant to attack him and the ranchero.

Dashing Charlie might be suspected of trying to get Matt Markham's gold, but for all that his career was known, or enough of it to bring the band of miners to a halt.

He was known as a dead shot, a man who would use his gun if necessary, and one who had nerve under the most trying circumstances.

Here he was standing in the open door of a log cabin which could resist the bullets of their rifles, if turned against it.

The door was a double one and massive, the shutters were likewise as strong, and it would take a cannon-ball to penetrate the heavy logs.

Then too he was known to be thoroughly armed, and to have as well the weapons belonging to Matt Markham, and the miner always was well supplied.

As for the Texan he too looked like one to fight to the bitter end, so that though the two

might be overpowered, the miners knew that some of their number would be killed.

They had formed no other plan than to hang both Dashing Charlie and the ranchero.

That done they would bury the miner and then see about his gold, it being thought that the doctor had a strong leaning of right on his side, as he seemed to tell a very straight story as to Miner Matt's wishes regarding it.

When Dashing Charlie saw that a fight was inevitable, he made up his mind to put two men out of it with his first shots, if he got the chance.

The two thus selected for the distinction were Old Rhubarb and Peter Parker.

"Get the guns ready, captain, haul the table close up to the door and have the bar ready to put up as soon as I have let them feel the weight of my guns," said Dashing Charlie.

"But surely I am to aid you, Charlie?"

"Not in the shooting, sir, for the door is hardly wide enough for both of us."

"Then too you must live to go back to your daughter, while I have no claims upon me."

"That shall not be, Emmett, for we live or die together in this fight. See! they are pressing forward!"

Then it was that Dashing Charlie uttered the words that open this chapter.

He had a revolver in each hand and stood with his foot upon the threshold, his weapons cocked, his fingers touching the triggers.

Then by his side, as nearly as he could get, was Captain Markham, and the two stood with revolvers ready.

The men halted at the ringing, determined command, and Peter Parker called out:

"Well, what is it?"

"Talk quick!"

"I wish no dealing with you, Peter Parker, except at revolver-range; but I desire to say this to others in that crowd, and that is, as they doubt me, to place a guard over the cabin, hold me prisoner and let others go with Captain Markham to Texas and see if all is not as I have stated.

"If it is not, then you have me in your power and can hang then as well as now."

"It won't do, pard," yelled the doctor.

"No, it's some trick he has thought of to escape us," Peter Parker cried.

"Well, I have offered you fair terms, so as you refuse, now come on and do your worst," Dashing Charlie said in a determined way.

"Hold on, pard, and let us offer terms," cried Poker Paul, anxious to avoid bloodshed and being really much attached to the scout.

"What terms do you offer?" asked Remsen, and others chimed in.

"Well, say that Dashing Charlie and his friend give up the gold and be allowed to leave the cabin, and the camps."

A number of voices cried out in favor of this proposition.

But the doctor's influence, aided by Peter Parker, soon squelched it.

"We must hang 'em fu'st, pards, and try 'em afterwards, as ther doctor says," Peter Parker cried.

The men cheered this sentiment, and emboldened by it, Peter Parker sprung to the front as leader, while Doctor Quick wisely kept in the background.

"Come, pards, string him up!" cried Peter Parker, and he held in his left hand a lariat already secured for the work.

But they were the last words the man ever uttered, as a sharp report rung out from the cabin door and Peter Parker dropped his length, a bullet in his brain.

At the same instant Captain Markham fired, and his bullet found a target in another of the miners who had been loudly in favor of hanging the two men.

A dozen shots followed then in rapid succession, but the two men at bay had sprung back into the darkness of the cabin, having turned the heavy oak table up on end as a shield.

It caught half a dozen bullets, while firing rapidly yet with deadly aim, the two men brought down human game with each crack of their revolvers, and several forms were piled up in the doorway.

From such a fire the miners in front shrunk away, and quickly a lane was opened where the range from the door placed them in deadly danger.

"Come on, you cowards, for there are but two of us!" shouted Dashing Charlie, his blood now hot, his nature aroused to defiance and action.

CHAPTER XXXV.

BOYS IN BLUE.

THAT the invitation of Dashing Charlie would have been accepted, by the desperate spirits confronting him, when there were a hundred to one against him and his comrade, seemed highly probable.

But Poker Paul, Remsen and others began to call a halt, to see if their throwing their force against the others, and in favor of Dashing Charlie, might not bring about a truce or compromise.

Hastily calling a few men about him, Poker

Paul was about to urge a parley, when another rush was made for the cabin.

A volley of revolver-bullets rattled into the door before the rush, but they did no damage, as both Dashing Charlie and the ranchero were out of range.

But their weapons rattled out death-shots rapidly, and other forms piled up the doorway.

But there were men crowding behind them now, those who would not be beaten off by two men, and they would have gained an entrance beyond all doubt but for the rapid clatter of hoofs in their rear and a warning cry from their comrades off on the edge of the crowd.

"Soldiers! soldiers!"

The cry was heard on a hundred lips, and up to the scene dashed an officer and twenty troopers.

"Hold! what means this?" came in a voice like a bugle.

And a young officer spurred between the crowd and the cabin, his men following quickly.

"Halt! front!" rang out his orders, and they were promptly obeyed.

The men too had their sabers drawn, and they were ready to face more miners than were in their front if their young commander gave the command.

He was a dashing-looking, handsome fellow of twenty-five, wearing the shoulder-straps of a first lieutenant of cavalry.

He possessed a fine physique, sat his horse splendidly, and his manly face showed that he had "chipped in" upon his own responsibility and had the nerve to carry his intention through.

"Back, men! for if you crowd, I will ride you down!"

"Speak, one of you, and say what this means?"

"It means, captain, that we have cornered in the cabin a pair of men who tried to rob a dead miner, and then objected to being hanged for it."

"So we just made a rush to string them up, and they showed fight."

"I should think they did, from the looks of the crop of dead men around," said the officer, dryly, in answer to Doctor Quick, who had been the one to reply to him.

"Permit me to explain, Lieutenant Gibbs," said a voice behind the officer.

And turning in his saddle, he beheld Dashing Charlie standing in the cabin door, a revolver in each hand.

"What! Dashing Charlie Emmett?" cried the officer, in amazement.

"Yes, Lieutenant Gibbs, and I must thank you for your timely arrival, for you saved this gentl-man and myself from being hanged."

"There is surely some mistake here, Dashing Charlie," cried the lieutenant, as he grasped the hand of the scout warmly in greeting.

"These men have not certainly been attacking you?"

"They have, sir, and this gentleman also, whom permit me to present to you as Captain Markham, a Texan ranchero."

The officer bowed and then turned his gaze upon the crowd of miners, a number of whom had slunk away at his coming, their guilty consciences not allowing them to face an army officer.

"Men, you have made a bad blunder in this attack on Dashing Charlie Emmett and his friend, for I will vouch for them on the scout's say-so."

"You know this man then, sir, as Dashing Charlie Emmett, the scout?" asked Poker Paul.

"I certainly do."

"You are sure there is no mistake?"

"None."

"I am very glad to hear you say so, sir, for though I did not doubt him, and some others of us here, it did look black against him according to circumstantial evidence."

"What is it all about, Emmett?" asked the officer.

"I can explain, sir, in a few words."

And Dashing Charlie did so, adding in the end:

"It seems, sir, that some one here in the camps, during my absence after Captain Markham, has been playing my Double."

"Your Double?"

"Yes, sir."

"That is strange, for we had your Double at the fort a month or so ago, and many believed him to be you, for he so claimed to be."

"But then your letter came to Colonel Buckner, by the courier who had left you the very day this Double of yours was in camp, so that showed him to be a fraud."

"I tried to overhaul him, for I am sure he is some outlaw who resembles you who was trying to get information about train-moving."

"So your Double has been here too?"

"Yes, sir, and as he was here a week ago, when I was in Texas, the boys said I was a fraud, and so wanted to hang me as a fraud, and Captain Markham also."

"They did not seem to find it easy work!" and the officer glanced at the half a dozen bodies piled up in and about the door.

"We defended ourselves as best we could."

"That is all right, Dashing Charlie; but are there not some of those men wounded?"

"No, sir, for we shot to kill."

"Yes, I know your style; but I will go into camp here, for it is a good place I notice."

Then turning to the miners, who were most of them rather uneasy at the turn affairs had taken, he said in a voice all heard:

"Men, I am Frederic Gibbs, lieutenant on the staff of Colonel Buckner, commandant of Fort Blank, and I am responsible for Dashing Charlie and his friend."

"I suppose you think you did right, but be more particular next time before you attempt to hang men without proof."

"Now go to your camps, and let this matter drop, for if you press it I shall take a hand in it, and I know you do not wish to fight your Government's troops."

The manly words of the young officer were well received by the miners, who at once began to disperse, many of them calling out to Dashing Charlie not to have any hard feelings against them.

And thus the Boys in Blue won the day.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

AFTER THE BATTLE.

THE miners left the cabin of Matt Markham feeling very much as though they had made fools of themselves.

A terrible tragedy, the lynching of two innocent men, had very nearly happened there, and but for the arrival of Lieutenant Gibbs and his men would have occurred.

He had come just in time to save Dashing Charlie, the ranchero and others, who would have fallen before the two men were overpowered.

As it was, half a dozen dead men had been carried off by their miner comrades, by order of the lieutenant, to find burial in the cemetery of the camps, known as the "Ghosts Outfit."

Of course there were many who held a grudge against Dashing Charlie for killing these men, though they had brought their death upon themselves.

They had gone off, growling and threatening, still trying to say that Dashing Charlie had no Double.

But the majority now admitted that they were wrong, and were glad that matters had turned out as they had.

Of course they were disappointed about the hidden gold of Miner Matt Markham, that they could get no "finger in the pie."

But, with his brother there to take charge, there was nothing for them to do.

The doctor had deserted the scene very early after the arrival of the Boys in Blue.

He seemed not to wish to face the sharp-eyed young officer, so had slipped away without attracting any more attention than was necessary.

His companion had been Racket Rob, and they went off together with their tongues busy, for they would not admit that they had lost the game.

"You did well, Racket Rob, in denying as you did, and but for the fact that the blue-coats arrived, we would have had matters go our way."

"But we have not lost the game yet, by any means."

"We don't hold a single trump card now, Doc, that I can see."

"Well, you are wrong, for the gold has not yet reached Texas."

"Ah!"

"It is a long trail to follow, and it will be carried on pack-mules, you know."

"With those blue-coats to guard it."

"Not they: for the Government is not guarding private gold with its soldiers."

"They'll hire a large guard, then."

"Hardly over half a dozen or so."

"And we are but two."

"Yes; but we can get together a dozen fellows, if we wish, and that gold will simply change owners."

"I am with you, Doc, and you are a dandy," was the eager reply.

And the two continued on their way, the doctor remarking, slyly:

"That fellow Markham gave you a terrible lashing about your past career, Racket Rob."

The man made no reply, and the doctor continued:

"I suppose what he said was true, about you setting the house on fire to burn up the outfit?"

"Well, it may be, and may not be, for we all have scenes in our life we do not make known, even you, Doc, for I saw that the coming of those soldiers scared you almost into fits."

"Were you ever a surgeon in the army, Doc?"

The face of the doctor had become white, his lips quivering, his hand tightened upon the reins and trembled, while his feet shook so that he could not keep them in their stirrups.

It was very plain that a chord of the past had been touched with the doctor which frightened him greatly.

"We will not discuss the past, sir," he said in a voice hardly audible.

"All right, Doc, for I am more than willing, as we both are in hiding from justice," and Racket Rob laughed in a peculiar way, which the doctor did not appear to like.

The others of the crowd meanwhile were filing back to the camps bearing the dead with them, and but three of the number had remained at the cabin.

These were Poker Paul, the landlord of the Den of Destiny, Iron Ike, the blacksmith, and Remsen.

These had stepped up to Dashing Charlie and the ranchero, congratulating them upon their escape, and as they were known to have shown friendship for them, their kind wishes were appreciated.

The soldiers went into camp back in the little valley where Matt Markham had kept his horse, and were soon cooking their noonday meal, while Poker Paul and the others offered their services in digging the grave for the dead miner.

According to the last request of Miner Markham, the grave was dug in the center of the cabin, and as they went down several feet through the hard ground, the spade blows gave back a hollow sound.

The officer, Dashing Charlie, a trio of soldiers who aided in digging the grave, stood around watching the work, as Poker Paul, Iron Ike and Remsen relieved the three Boys in Blue from time to time.

Captain Markham stood apart by the body of his brother, which had been closely enveloped in the canvas brought by the scout from the camps.

"How hollow the ground seems beneath here," said Lieutenant Fred Gibbs.

No one could account for it, and as deeper and deeper went the spades, the more and more hollow became the sound.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

A STARTLING DISCOVERY.

"CAPTAIN MARKHAM, come here please."

It was Dashing Charlie who called the ranchero from the side of his dead brother in one end of the large cabin to the grave they were digging.

"Well, Dashing Charlie!"

"We have dug down, sir, seven feet, as the sound the spades made caused us to go deeper than we otherwise would have done."

"We have now struck boards."

"Indeed! What does it mean?"

"I suggested that it is the hiding-place of your brother's gold."

"It may be, for he was most anxious to have us bury him here, and I recall now that he said his burial would reveal a secret."

"Dig on, men, please, and let us solve the mystery."

This was soon done and the men found a space covered with boards.

The shape of the grave was altered and it was seen that the boards had been placed in position from beneath, not from the cabin, and the dirt then filled in.

After awhile the boards were removed and a tunnel-like way was revealed, ending at the grave and running off toward the hill behind the cabin.

But the removal of the boards also showed a coffin lying in the bottom of the tunnel.

The tunnel-way led from the grave back under the cabin, and the coffin filled the space dug out.

It was a large coffin, and had upon it a cover divided in three pieces, heavy and crudely made yet strong.

Raising one of these pieces a startling sight met the eye, for the coffin was filled with gold nuggets, dust and grains of the precious metal.

An exclamation of surprise and admiration arose from all around the grave.

"Here indeed is a fortune!" cried the lieutenant.

"All of a quarter of a million dollars in gold," was Poker Paul's comment.

"Your brother did not exaggerate his riches, Captain Markham," said Dashing Charlie.

"It is indeed a fortune to leave my little daughter."

"Poor, dead Matt! I would that he could have lived to enjoy it, to spend many years of happiness with us," and the ranchero turned away.

"While the grave is open, Captain Markham, it would be well to follow up the tunnel, for the entrance was made to this place from without," the lieutenant said.

"Yes, the tunnel is a natural one, simply enlarged here and there by Miner Markham, and the end boarded up to prevent a disastrous cave-in.

"The tunnel has an exit, and I will follow it," and the scout sprung down into the grave without hesitation.

A lantern found in the cabin was lighted and handed to him, and with it he started through the tunnel in a stooping posture.

It was some five feet in height by three in breadth, and on the scout went until he had gone more than three hundred feet, the tunnel widening as he went until it ended in a cavern of considerable size.

But there seemed no exit to the cavern.

Carefully Dashing Charlie examined the sides, but all was a wall of rock.

The cavern terminated in a space the size of a small room, then stretched away into the narrow tunnel running under the cabin a hundred yards away.

Then Dashing Charlie closely examined the flooring.

"Ah!"

The exclamation showed that he had made a discovery.

Almost at his feet was a trap-door.

This he raised, one end resting against the wall of the cavern.

The trap was of boards in an irregular size.

These boards were heavy and solid, and fitted into crevices in the rocks, for when raised an aperture was visible looking down into a cave below.

The bottom part of these boards had been most ingeniously covered with rocks, cemented together and made to so closely resemble the roof of the cave that when the trap was down and nicely fitted in place, there seemed no break in the ceiling of the lower cavern.

It was a most clever blind, and the scout dropped down into the lower cave.

He found that he could not touch the roof by a couple of feet when standing on tiptoe.

The opening to the upper cavern was of course a natural one, and had been discovered by the miner, who had first used the cave below as a home.

It was some thirty feet by ten in size, and the ceiling ran ten feet in height.

There were some worn-out tools, a box and a barrel, with an old cot in the lower cave, that was all—apparently left there as worthless.

But, by placing the box upon the cot, the barrel upon the box, the scout could readily draw himself up into the cavern above.

He stood there and lowered the trap into place, and then replacing the cot, box and barrel, went out of the cave.

It opened upon the valley through which ran the stream fed by springs.

Making a circuit, he appeared before those in the cabin.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

OF KINDRED TIES.

BEFORE leaving the cavern, Dashing Charlie left all as he had found it and then made his way around to the cabin.

All were anxiously awaiting some report from him and looking down into the cavernous opening when he suddenly appeared in the door of the cabin.

"So you found a way out, Dashing Charlie?"

"Yes, Lieutenant Gibbs; but let us first bury the dead miner, and then investigate the discovery I have made."

"Yes, it is better so."

"Now, to remove this gold and pack it."

"Here are canvas bags already made—I found them upon my brother's cot," said Captain Markham.

The gold was packed in the bags by the soldiers, and then tied up securely by the officer, when they were placed to one side.

The body of the dead miner was then placed in the coffin, the lid nailed down, and Lieutenant Gibbs repeated, in his rich, impressive voice, the service for the dead.

Then the earth, placed on blankets as it was removed from the grave, was replaced and the top smoothed over after being packed down hard, so that it would not settle.

"You know that we were to burn the cabin, Dashing Charlie."

"Yes, but it will be well enough to do that, sir, at the last moment when we start away."

"True, that will be best."

"Now let me thank you all for your very great kindness to me, for it has been to my poor dead brother."

"Lieutenant Gibbs, I also desire to express to you my appreciation of the service rendered by you and your men, for you saved our lives I feel assured."

"I was in luck to happen through the camps."

"I was on a scout and concluded to take a look in at the miners, for it has a very good effect upon the bad element in the mining country to show them that soldiers are within call sometimes, and hearing the firing as I was following the trail I hastened to the cabin, for I knew that revolver-practice in this country meant deadly work."

"You were just in the nick of time too, lieutenant, as I can vouch for," said Dashing Charlie, while Captain Markham asked:

"Lieutenant, you bear the name of my wife, for she was a Gibbs—Beatrice Gibbs, of Virginia."

"Indeed! I am from Maryland but had relatives in Virginia, my uncle owning Berkeley Manor in the Shenandoah Valley, a grand old estate that was destroyed by fire under rather tragic circumstances, I have heard, for I was a little boy then, and, by the way, a cousin of my father married a man of your name."

"Cousin Beatrice was her name, and I recall her as a very beautiful girl of seventeen the only time I ever saw her."

"She was my second cousin."

"And she was my wife, Lieutenant Gibbs."

"I am happy indeed to meet you, and I recall now that my wife had a young cousin who went to West Point and graduated with the highest honor, afterward entering the cavalry: but I have been so isolated of late years, such a hermit in my Texas home, since the death of your cousin Beatrice, that I have lost sight of the family completely."

"It is a pleasure, Captain Markham, for me to meet you, sir, and far more to have served you."

"But are you aware that your wife has a half-brother in the army?"

"I know that she had a half-brother, Gabriel Buckner, who was a noble-hearted, but wild young fellow, who killed his best friend in a duel about a lady whom both loved."

"If I recall aright Buckner was not to blame, but he left home, and it was said enlisted in the army, and his cousin never knew what had become of him."

"It will give me pleasure, sir, to make known to you that he was not to blame in the cause of the duel he fought, and twice spared his rival's life; but at the third fire demanded killed him."

"He enlisted as a private soldier, and in one year rose by merit to a sergeant's rank."

"The next year he saved the life of his wounded captain, tied him to the back of his horse, and sent the animal away at a run for the camps, while he remained behind as a sacrifice."

"But he stood off the Indians until help came, and the captain said he would either have him dismissed the service for making a deserter of him in the presence of the enemy, or have him made a lieutenant."

"It was hard work then to get a man from the ranks a commission, but while the matter was under discussion, Sergeant Buckner again distinguished himself, and that won him the rank of a second lieutenant."

"Since then he has risen a rank every three years, until now he is colonel commanding Fort Blank and this detachment, and I have the honor of being an aide on his staff, and a better commander, nobler and squarer man I never knew; in fact, all the ladies at the fort are in love with him, and he is the ideal of his men. Eh, Sergeant Gallagher?" and the lieutenant turned to the sergeant of the detachment.

"Yes, sur, he is the same, and the best man as ever threw leg over a horse—yis, sur, begin' your pardon, the colonel is a'fther bein' a dandy," earnestly responded the sergeant.

"I am glad to hear such a good report of him, for my wife loved him most dearly."

"He would be more than pleased to have you visit him, Captain Markham, so suppose you return with me."

"It will be a pleasant break for you."

"I should like to, but—"

"Ob, go, captain; for if you'll trust me, I'll stay here and guard your fortune until your return."

"Trust you? Why, Charlie Emmett, I would trust no man more."

"Then, go! for it will take some days to hunt up your horses, get pack-mules and saddles, and the men to serve as guards."

"How far is it from here to the fort, lieutenant?"

"We can make it in forty-eight hours, sir, easy riding."

"Then I will return with you, if there is any way of my getting back."

"The colonel will send you back under escort, sir."

"Then I will go, and in your hands, Dashing Charlie, I leave the arranging of matters here."

"There is a bill to pay that rascally doctor—"

"I'd rather pay him in lead than gold," growled Dashing Charlie.

"Well, gold it will have to be this time; and there is an account at the store and elsewhere, I believe."

"Square them up, get the mules and horses necessary, also the men and the provisions for the trip, and expect me back within a week's time."

"All will be ready, sir, by the time you return, so that you can start at once."

"Of course you will go as guide and captain of the outfit?"

Dashing Charlie glanced in a peculiar way at the lieutenant.

Then he said:

"No, sir; I will be compelled to remain here, for I am on duty in the mining-camps, my gold-digging being but a blind."

"I will, however, send a good guide with you, and go myself beyond the danger-line of Muello, the Mexican, and his men."

"I ask no more," said the ranchero.

And a couple of hours after he rode away by the side of Lieutenant Gibbs at the head of the band of troopers.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

AT FORT BLANK.

THE scars upon his face, neck and hands, made Captain Dick Markham very sensitive.

He could not explain that they were marks of

his grand courage, his heroism, in entering a burning mansion and saving the life of Beatrice Gibbs.

She, though loving his brother, when she saw and felt all that he had suffered for her, had become his wife.

He had asked her for her love the very night of the fire, and had been refused.

She, knowing that Matthew Markham loved her also, had determined to await the declaration that must come from him.

Then, when she saw the man suffering agonies through his heroism, she had gone to him determined to sacrifice herself for him.

She had told him she would take back her refusal, that she would become his wife.

He refused to allow the sacrifice, to bind her to one disfigured as he was; but at last he yielded and the result is known.

When he buried his devoted wife, Richard Markham felt at first that he had laid his heart in the grave with her.

He had soon however found that there was much to live for in the love of his beautiful little daughter, and as time went by he became happy in her devoted affection for him.

He had employed for her the best of governesses, and teaching her himself, for he was a finely educated man, at the age of seventeen Beatrice was a finished young lady.

In addition to her being a fine scholar, and musician, she was a born prairie girl, could ride a wild mustang, shoot a rifle or revolver unerringly, throw a lasso or follow a trail.

Then came Dashing Charlie to the pretty prairie home of Ranger's Rest, with the incidents following in rapid succession which go to make up this story.

Having found in Lieutenant Fred Gibbs a kinsman of his daughter, and through him the man who had been a most devoted brother to his wife, Captain Markham was anxious to meet him and know the two more thoroughly.

He knew that he was all his daughter had to cling to, and, in case he was taken from her, there was no one upon whom he could depend to become her guardian.

As they rode on toward the fort together, Lieutenant Gibbs told his newly-found relative that Colonel Buckner had won fortune as well as fame.

He had invested his small earnings in some property to help out a friend, and right there had a city sprung up, until his purchase of a couple of thousand dollars had reached in value as many hundred thousand.

"Three years ago, when I first came West as a lieutenant, Captain Markham, Colonel Buckner asked me if I had any money to invest.

"I told him I was starting in life with my sword, my commission, a complete outfit, and some dozen hundred dollars.

"So he advised me to invest the money in some property, and I did so according to his directions.

"The result is that I have now a property upon which I am paying taxes at a valuation of twenty thousand dollars; so you see I am quite well off for a second lieutenant."

Thus the two beguiled the time in conversation as they rode on toward the fort.

The evening of the second day they came in sight of Fort Blank.

It was located on a heavily-timbered hill, commanding a fine view of the surrounding country for miles, and there were a number of cowboys seen on the plains, guarding the large herds of Government cattle grazing near.

There were several hundred horses also, and the fort had the appearance of being a very extensive cattle-ranch.

There was a stockade-wall around it, and the quarters were of logs.

The officers' quarters were apart upon a natural park, the center being a large parade ground.

A saw-mill upon the river had furnished lumber in plenty, and all being whitewashed, there was an air of neatness resting upon the whole place which marked the commander as a man of ability and discipline.

A light battery, a battalion of infantry and a couple of companies of cavalry comprised the military force, while there were several army stores, a wagon-train, a stage-coach station, scouts, guides, cowboys and hangers-on by the dozen, to make up a settlement of some twelve hundred souls.

Fort Blank was Colonel Markham's headquarters post, but his command extended a long way up and down the border, several other posts and outposts being included in it.

As the little squad of cavalrymen came in sight the dress parade was in progress, and Captain Markham gazed on with considerable interest and admiration.

He marked the soldierly form of the colonel facing his soldiers, and noted the stern, but kindly face, with the iron-gray mustache and hair.

Then he was led by Lieutenant Gibbs to his quarters, and a moment after stood face to face with the handsome, distinguished-looking soldier who had risen from the ranks to a colonelcy, winning fame and fortune by his daring, splendid career.

CHAPTER XL.

THE RETURN.

AND you are Richard Markham, of whom I have heard so much!

"Well, indeed I am glad to meet you, you who saved my sweet sister's life, you who were her husband, for though but a half-sister of mine, I knew no difference in my devotion to her.

"We must be brothers, Richard Markham."

Such was the warm welcome given by Gabriel Buckner to Captain Markham, who felt in his heart how sincere it was.

"Well, this wild young kinsman of mine is always running off in what he is pleased to call scouting expeditions, and though I have to do him the credit to say that he renders most valuable service, I must say that on this one he has certainly done me a great favor.

When we talked to Richard Markham they forgot his scarred face in the man, and he at once became a favorite with all who met him at the fort, for Colonel Buckner gave a dinner in his honor.

After four days' stay as the guest of the colonel, Richard Markham started upon his return, Lieutenant Gibbs requesting to command the escort back to the valley mines, where they were to join Dashing Charlie.

When Captain Markham said farewell to Colonel Buckner he grasped his hand and remarked, with deep feeling:

"Remember if aught happens to me, I shall leave my child to your care."

"I will be a father to her, Richard, though I sincerely trust that it will be many a long day before you pass away," was the answer.

"It may, and it may not; but remember your promise."

"I will not forget."

Thus they parted, and the march back to the valley mines was begun.

It was the evening of the second day when they came in sight of the lone cabin of the dead miner.

Dashing Charlie was seated in front of the door smoking his pipe, but greeted them with a wave of his hat as they drew near.

The lieutenant ordered the thirty soldiers into camp in the valley, and with Captain Markham joined the scout.

"I am glad to see you back in safety, Captain Markham, for the Mountain Marauders robbed the coach on the Santa Fé Trail two nights ago, and also made a raid upon several miners' cabins not far from here.

"I suppose they thought you had carried your gold with you to the fort, taking advantage of going with the soldiers, or they would doubtless have paid me a visit."

"It is well for them they did not, Dashing Charlie, for they would have gotten lead instead of gold, I am sure," said the lieutenant, with a laugh.

"I would have given them the best reception in my power, sir; but did you not see any traces of them in the mountains, for you came through their range?"

"My guide said that there had been parties of horsemen along just before us, but if they meditated an ambush they concluded we were too strong for them.

"But here is an official paper for you, Charlie, from the colonel."

"Thank you, sir, and pardon me until I read it."

The official paper was a long one, and Dashing Charlie read it twice through before he again joined the lieutenant and Captain Markham.

The latter had gone into the cabin, and stood gazing at the spot beneath which rested the form of his brother.

Memories of the bitter past flooded upon him as he stood there, and he mused aloud:

"The early years began with sorrow and tempest.

"It divided you, Dick, from me, and though you sought my life, I believe it was in a moment when you knew not what you did.

"I, through Beatrice, saved you from imprisonment, from, as we then believed, the gallows, for no one thought I could live, wounded as I was.

"Deformed by my burns, I yet won that dear woman who became my wife, and left me an image of herself to love when dying—our beautiful child.

"Your brother, Beatrice, the noble Gabriel, has made a name for himself, and a fugitive, too, in his early life, has become a man whom I love as my own brother.

"And you, poor Matt, lying here beneath my feet, I gladly forgave, and was happy in being near you at the end.

"And to my child you left your hard-earned fortune, won 'mid deadly dangers and hardships untold, a fortune so many sought to rob you of.

"Well, the clouds have gone by, and I remember you now only with pleasure at our reunion, that I was able to give you a moment of joy in your last moments on earth.

"What is before me, Dick, my brother, God only knows; but until the end will I remember this spot, this grave beneath the arches of your home, unmarked by stone as you requested, but

ever to live in my heart, and the memory of those who love you."

He brushed from his eyes the tears that had gathered there, and turning, left the cabin.

Without he found the lieutenant and Dashing Charlie watching the preparations of the soldier cook for the evening meal.

The sun was going down beneath the horizon of mountains far away, and the shadows were creeping over the valley; but the clouds were passing away from the long-suffering heart of Richard Markham.

CHAPTER XLI.

THE WRONG HORSE.

WHEN left alone by Captain Markham and the soldiers, who had gone to the fort, Dashing Charlie set to work to arrange against a surprise and trouble.

Poker Paul offered to remain with him, saying that his clerk could run the Den of Destiny as well as he could, and Iron Ike made a like offer.

But Dashing Charlie declined their kind offer with thanks, and added that he did not expect any trouble, and as for the gold, he would be responsible for its safety.

The moment he was left alone he made his way, with two bags at a time, to the secret cavern and put it safely away.

Replacing the trap as he had found it, Dashing Charlie returned to his cabin, reloaded all the weapons found there and arranged for resistance if there should be an attack made upon him.

He had asked Poker Paul to tell Doctor Quick that he wished to see him, to pay off the debt owed him by Markham, the miner, for professional services, and also to send any one else who held a claim against the dead man in the camps, to come with their bills.

To pay them he had kept out a certain amount of gold, and hidden it away in the cabin.

Having cooked his supper, he looked to his and Captain Markham's horses, for the rancho had ridden the animal belonging to his brother, as his own was just off from a long trail.

Then he retired to the cabin, as night had come on, and throwing some logs upon the fire, sat down to meditate.

The fact that half a dozen men had died there in the door that day, most of them by his hand, and that the red stains were in full view of where he sat, did not seem to disturb his conscience in the least.

Nor did it trouble him in the least that beneath his feet, almost, lay the cold form of the old miner, who had, as he was doing then, sat in that same chair, night after night, for long years.

He smoked his pipe, and was as serene as a May morn, also undisturbed by the thought that he was the sole guardian of nearly a quarter of a million in gold, gold which had caused much anxiety, bickering and longing in the mining settlement, and which had nearly cost him his life that day.

And as he sat there in meditation, puffing away at his pipe, he was startled by a loud snort from the little valley back of the cabin.

"Ah! Comanche scents danger, and is warning me," he said.

He arose and went to the door and listened, though he dared not open it with the bright fire-light within.

A few moments of silence passed, and then came another snort, an angry neigh, and immediately following was heard a wild, unearthly scream in a man's voice.

"Ah! Comanche has caught some game."

"I must go to aid the good horse."

So saying, he quickly hung a blanket before the fire, shutting out the light, and opening the door partly, dodged out into the darkness, revolver in hand.

As he did so he heard the rapid clatter of hoofs down the trail, and a moment after up to the cabin door galloped the splendid roan stallion, shaking something in his mouth.

"Ah, good horse, you foiled them, did you?"

"Horse-thieves, were they, and they got the wrong animal that time."

"Thanks, I'll relieve you of this piece of garment you have taken from our foe."

"Good horse! now go back and enjoy your rest and grass, for I must not expose myself to a stray bullet, as I am too important a person to-night to take chances of a shot in the dark."

"Go, good horse," and caressing the animal affectionately for a moment, the scout sent him trotting back to his pasture, for he never staked him out except upon rarest occasions, the horse no more thinking of leaving his master than a dog would have done.

Quickly re-entering the cabin and barring the door, Dashing Charlie took down the blanket from the fire and looked at the piece of garment he held in his hand.

"It is a piece of a woolen shirt, and torn from the breast, for here are two of the buttons in front."

"You gave him a severe nip, Comanche, I'll bet high on it, and he was only too glad to get away."

"I'll see if I can match this piece of shirt in the camps to-morrow."

"Perhaps I can follow the trail, for it was made after the dew fell."

"I can try it at least."

Folding the rag he put it carefully away in his pocket, and soon after unrolled his blankets and threw himself down on the cot to sleep.

He dropped off into slumber as quickly as an infant, and though seeming to sleep deeply arose on the instant as the deep hoot of an owl was heard not far away.

"Ah! owl or outlaw, I wonder?"

"I'll wait to hear it a second time."

Soon again came the hoot, and instantly he lay down again with the simple remark:

"There are feathers on that bird."

Again he slept soundly but awakened with a start when the yelp of coyotes was heard outside.

He listened a moment and said:

"They scent the blood on the ground."

"They are all right."

Again he slept and not until the dawn came did he arouse himself.

Then he sprung up from the cot and was ready for what the day had in store for him, be it what it might.

CHAPTER XLII.

DASHING CHARLIE HEARS NEWS FROM POKER PAUL.

DASHING CHARLIE was cautious, as all brave men are.

He did not venture out of the cabin, even in the daylight, until he had reconnoitered through the "peep-holes," which Miner Markham had wisely put in his cabin when he built it.

The scout knew how easy it would be for a foe in ambush to pick him off as he stepped out of the door of the cabin.

Hence he was cautious.

He then gave a long, peculiar whistle and it was promptly answered by a neigh, followed by clattering hoofs.

Then Comanche trotted up to the door.

"It's all right, old horse, is it?"

The stallion nodded in a knowing way, and Dashing Charlie stepped out of the door.

No danger lurked near, so he threw wood on the fire, and taking a bucket went to the spring for fresh water.

He saw in the pasture the horse of Captain Markham dragging his stake-rope.

"Ahl that was pulled up, was that stake."

"You saw him do it, Comanche, so went to the rescue."

"That was right."

"Now to look for trails."

The scout spent half an hour searching the ground, found a trail for the prairies and followed it.

It led past the cabin down to where it joined another one.

"Some one waited here on horseback for the horse-thief to return."

"Then both of them fled empty-handed."

"Now to get breakfast, and then for a ride into the camps."

As soon as he had eaten his breakfast, and he enjoyed it with all the zest of a strong, hungry man, Dashing Charlie called for Comanche, threw his saddle and bridle on, locked the cabin door and rode away.

He readily followed the trail, in spite of the numerous others.

It led toward the mining camps, but branched off at the first cabin and went to a mountain spur.

"I'll go to the camps first, for I know where that trail leads," he muttered.

He reached the camps soon, which consisted of several hundred cabins spread out on each side of a narrow valley for a couple of miles or more.

In the most convenient spot was a tavern or two, several gambling and liquor saloons, the blacksmith-shop of Iron Ike, and a store of considerable magnitude.

One of the most conspicuous places that went to make up Mining City, or Valley Mines City, as it was also called, was Poker Paul's Den of Destiny.

This was a large shanty, and a gambling-saloon pure and simple.

It was never closed, day or night or Sunday, for Poker Paul had day and night men to run his games for him, and he was wont to divide his own time up so as to be on hand in the mornings and the first part of the nights.

So Poker Paul was on hand when Dashing Charlie rode up, dismounted and entered.

"Ho, pard, glad to see you," he called out, cheerily.

The scout had met a dozen or more men he recognized as having been in the crowd against him on the day before, but had been greeted in a friendly way by them as he came along.

"Did you tell Doctor Quick I wished to have him see me to-day, Poker Paul?" asked Dashing Charlie.

"No, I did not."

"I asked you to do so."

"True, but as you saw Old Rhubarb here last night yourself, I concluded you would let him know."

"I saw Old Rhubarb here last night?" said Dashing Charlie, in amazement.

"Yes."

"When?"

"Last night."

"At what time?"

"Twelve o'clock."

"Are you dreaming, Paul?"

"No."

"You say that I was here last night?"

"Of course I do."

"I was not."

"Come, Charlie, no monkey business with me."

"I say I was not here."

"Last night?"

"Yes."

"I say you were."

"See here, Poker Paul, my Double must be abroad again, for I did not leave the cabin of Matt Markham last night."

"The deuce you say!"

"I mean it."

"Then it was your Double."

"He was here?"

"He was."

"You saw him?"

"I did."

"And mistook him for me?"

"I did."

"Did you talk with him?"

"Yes."

"And supposed it was me?"

"I never had the slightest doubt of it, Dashing Charlie."

"And others saw him?"

"Sure."

"Who else?"

"Well, Torment, my clerk."

"Who else?"

"Old Rhubarb was here when you came in—"

"You mean my Double?"

"Yes, if you say so."

"Well, I do; but then?"

"I laughed as I caught a view of Old Rhubarb's face when he saw you—your Double, I mean."

"He looked badly scared, but you nodded to him pleasantly, took a drink, got Remsen to go to the store with you to get something you wished to buy, and stopped and had a word with Old Rhubarb."

"And all believed it was me?"

"All who saw your Double, yes."

"Remsen went to the store with him?"

"Yes."

"Did he come back?"

"Who?"

"My Double."

"No, but Remsen did, and he said you made considerable of a purchase."

"Well, Poker Paul, I have no reason to doubt you, and so I say I must find this Double of mine."

"Did he pay for the drink he got?"

"Yes, and treated others."

"Let me see the money."

Poker Paul got the bill and Dashing Charlie said promptly:

"This is a counterfeit."

"Now come with me to see Remsen and Doctor Quick."

CHAPTER XLIII. THE COUNTERFEITER.

THE storekeeper at Valley Camps called out to Dashing Charlie as he entered with Poker Paul:

"Ho, Dashing Charlie, glad to see you in the camps again this morning."

"What can I do for you?"

It was a lax time at the store, in fact the camps were never lively in the morning unless it was a holiday or Sunday.

"When do you remember seeing me last, Remsen?" asked the scout.

"Why last night of course."

"Was I here last night, Pard Remsen?"

"Why, Charlie, were you drunk?"

"No."

"Well, I noticed that you had had a drop, but I didn't think you were so bad as that."

"As what?"

"Not to remember you were here."

"I do not remember it."

"Why you got me to come over with you from the Den, and made a number of purchases."

"Did I pay you for them?"

"No, I slated them as you asked me to do."

"How much was the bill?"

The man turned to his book and answered:

"Ammunition, groceries, a pair of blankets, pair of boots and hat—in all sixty dollars."

"It is a pity I did not pay you for them."

"Well, you had the money but said you had other use for it last night."

"How do you know I had the money?"

"I changed a hundred-dollar bill for you."

"Have you the bill?"

"Yes."

"Please to let me see it."

Remsen got the note, while Poker Paul looked on with interest.

"Remsen?"

"Yes, Dashing Charlie."

"This bill is a counterfeit."

"What! up to the game the doctor accused you of, Charlie?"

"No."

"What then?"

"I did not give you the bill."

"You certainly did."

"No, for I was not away from the cabin of Matt, the Miner, last night."

"Can it be that your Double was abroad again?"

"It would seem so, and I wish you to take good note of me now, some peculiarity about me, so as to be sure next time you see me that it is not my Double."

"I'll do it."

"As will I," added Poker Paul.

"Now, Remsen, you have been swindled, but I will either have my Double pay you back some day, or satisfy you that you are avenged."

"Do it, and I'll call it square."

"Now let me ask you if you have sold a shirt to any one this morning?"

"Well, yes, I sold one to Old Rhubarb."

"Ah! what kind was it?"

"A blue, double-breasted flannel shirt."

"Yes, and do you recall who you sold this one to?"

As he spoke, Dashing Charlie pulled out the piece of shirt he had taken from his horse.

"Let me see, it is hard to tell, for they are all so much alike, but—"

"Well?"

"I remember these two buttons."

"You remember them?"

"Yes, as I only had half a dozen on a card like them."

"You know who bought them?"

"Yes."

"Who was it?"

"Racket Rob."

"Indeed?"

"Yes, he took a fancy to them and bought them."

"I see."

"And he has bought shirts from you?"

"Oh, yes."

"Thank you," and then Dashing Charlie began to examine the counterfeit one-hundred-dollar bill again.

"You gave the change for this, Remsen!"

"Yes."

"I will give you good money for it."

"I am more than willing."

The money was paid over, and, turning to Poker Paul, Dashing Charlie said:

"See here! the ink is hardly dry on this bill."

"You are right."

"It rubs, as you notice."

"The paper is an excellent imitation, and the counterfeit of the die nearly perfect."

"It is a very dangerous counterfeit bill, Poker Paul."

"How did your Double get it?"

"Don't give a hint of it, please, and I'll ask Remsen to keep dark also; but that fellow has his press here somewhere and makes this money."

"It must be so."

"It is so, and there is no better place than in the mines to pass it, for the miners never notice their money."

"But I must find out who this dangerous Double of mine is."

"Call on me, Dashing Charlie, if I can be of any aid."

"Thank you, Paul; but now I must be off."

"Where are you going?"

"To make a professional call upon Old Rhubarb and Racket Rob."

"Better go slow; but, shall I go with you?"

"No, thanks! I will go alone."

And he did so.

CHAPTER XLIV.

PAYING OFF OLD SCORES.

DOCTOR QUICK had his quarters in about the most convenient locality for the good of all the miners, as far as securing his professional services were concerned.

His cabin was a large one, having four rooms in it, and it was situated upon a hill at the base of which five trails met.

It was on a spur of a range, and the cabin commanded an extensive view down the valley and upon each side.

The doctor was wont to "put on airs," for he had in his rooms on shelves several skulls, and suspended from a joist was a skeleton of a man who had been hanged and whose bones he had dressed and mounted.

There were books on medicine, and bottles with Latin labels, so that the average miner was deeply impressed by a glance into his quarters.

He had two Chinese servants, whose little hut was back of what the doctor was pleased to call his "mansion."

There was his stable, and he kept half a dozen as good horses as could be found in the mines.

The doctor was not "at home" when Dashing Charlie called.

"Gone see muchee sickee man—maybe climbee goldee stair," said one of the Celestials.

But who was likely to "climb the golden stairs," the doctor or the man he had gone to see, the heathen Chinese did not make exactly plain.

An appropriate view from the doctor's cabin, and in close proximity to it, was the "Ghosts' Layout" or cemetery.

The men killed the morning before had been buried at sunset the previous evening, as Dashing Charlie saw their graves as he rode by.

"Well, it would have been me six feet under ground if they had had their way," he said, as he rode on.

His destination now was to the cabin of Racket Rob.

He had an idea that Racket Rob was the sick man whom the doctor had gone to see, though the Chinese servant did not know.

Racket Rob's home was a hut in the mountain wilds, about a mile from the doctor's.

It was a desolate place, and he lived there all alone, that is when he was not drunk in the camps or beating his meals out of some of the miners.

He was supposed to work a mine, but he only did so when his credit became worthless and he was driven to it. Whenever he got money he paid his debts and with the balance went upon a protracted racket, hence his name of Racket Rob.

The timber grew thick in the rear of Racket Rob's cabin, and the trail led right up into the mountain fastnesses.

As he rode up to the cabin, Dashing Charlie saw the doctor's horse staked out near, with his saddle on and the bridle hanging upon the horn.

The sorry-looking beast that Racket Rob claimed the ownership of was staked out in the valley, and apparently content with the sparse food he got there.

Leaving his own animal out of sight, Dashing Charlie made a rapid flank movement, and reaching the cabin suddenly appeared in the door.

There lay Racket Rob upon his bunk, and his shirt was off, his broad breast exposed, and upon the chest was a bad-looking gash and bruise.

His left arm was free of bandages, and the bullet-wound was visible.

The doctor was bending over him with lint and bandages, engaged in dressing his wounds when Dashing Charlie appeared.

"Good-morning, pard, I concluded to drop in."

The darkening of the doorway and the words were the first intimation the

"I see that you have other weapons here, so I offer the same advice regarding them."

"Now, as I am talking to you, let me say also that I have instructions to pay you your bill for services rendered to the late Matthew Markham, miner."

"How much is it?"

"I made in all one hundred and fifty visits."

"At how much a visit?"

"Five dollars."

"Well?"

"Then I supplied medicines, and, altogether, for remaining all night a number of times, it is just one thousand dollars."

"Modest, very; but I would not dispute the bill if it was a true one."

"Sh!"

"Don't get indignant because I have trapped you in a lie, for I have Remsen's visit for medicines, so you furnished nothing."

"You remained one night, when it stormed, all night at the cabin, to benefit yourself, that is all."

"As to the number of visits," and Dashing Charlie took a note-book from his pocket. "You made just thirty-three by night and seventy by day."

"Your bill, Doctor Quick, amounts therefore to just four hundred and forty-nine dollars, you having multiplied it by two, or made it out when you were drunk, so that you saw double—You are used to seeing *doubles*, you know."

"Leave the money, then, at Remsen's for me?"

"No, I shall be at Matt Markham's cabin this afternoon, so come after it."

"I am too busy."

"Then you will lose it."

"I'll send for it."

"Come, don't be a coward as well as a villain, for if I tried to do you any harm, I have you now wholly at my mercy."

"Come for the money and I'll pay it to you, and if you are afraid to come alone, bring any one with you that you please."

"I'll come."

"Come by day, let me suggest, and not by night, as you did last night."

"I came last night?"

"O, yes, along with Racket Rob."

"You hitched your horses some distance from the cabin, and—"

"It is not so."

"It is a lie."

"I can follow a trail, gentlemen, begging the pardon of those who are gentlemen for calling you so."

"I know tracks when I see them, and if anything more was wanting, sir, I have this piece to match what is torn from Racket Rob's shirt."

"My horse is as good as a watch-dog."

"You were discovered, and how you escaped with his killing you I do not know."

"Better not try it again, Racket Rob, you and the Doc, for I knew of your visit when it occurred, but left Comanche to drive you off."

"Now, Doc, you better patch Racket Rob up again, for he needs it."

"The wound I gave him is healing, I see."

"The wound you gave me!" cried Racket Rob.

"Yes, for I shot you in the arm as you ran away from Matt Markham's cabin."

"I was not there."

"Oh, yes you were, for I came over here the same night and found the doctor here patching you up."

"You lied about the way you got the wound, but I know."

"It is not so."

Dashing Charlie laughed.

He seemed to enjoy the discomfiture of the two men.

Then he said:

"You both tried to hang me yesterday, and Captain Richard Markham as well."

"To hang a man by the dead body of his brother whom you were trying to rob."

"Now you, Racket Rob, swore falsely when you said that you did not know Richard Markham, for you remember him but too well as he has good cause to remember you."

"I also knew that you were snooping around the cabin for no good last night, trying to get a shot at me and find that hidden gold."

"You are determined to get it, and will plot to do so; but I warn you that if I catch you at any funny business I will see that you are stretched up with a rope ten minutes after, for I can hang you both."

"Mark my words, I said, hang you both."

"You have no proof that I ever did a wrong act," pompously said the doctor.

"Haven't I?"

"No!"

"Well, just force me to spring a trap on you, doctor, and see."

"Men of your skill, for I admit that you know your business thoroughly, don't hide in mining-camps away from their families, when—"

"My family?" gasped the doctor.

"So I said, and mean it, and I might give you further proof that I know you are a fugitive from justice if I wished."

"You are useful here in the mines, you are

making a fortune by easy work, so be content, and don't try to get rich suddenly by robbing a dead man."

"Now I have threatened you both, so beware, for I mean all that I have said."

"Call, Doc, and get your money, and call soon, for I am squaring up Matt Markham's accounts with the world according to his written instructions."

"Good-day, gentlemen," and Dashing Charlie walked out of the cabin.

The doctor made a half effort to seize his revolver, but saw an eye glancing over the shoulder of the scout, so restrained, and soon after they heard the clatter of hoofs as Dashing Charlie rode down the trail to the camps.

CHAPTER XLVI.

DISAPPOINTED OUTLAWS—AN UNHEEDED WARNING.

DASHING CHARLIE returned leisurely to the camp.

He seemed well satisfied with his visit, and stopped at the tavern and had dinner with Poker Paul and Remsen.

They told him others who had seen his Double the night before, and gave him their opinion of the result of the battle at the miner's cabin the day before.

"They do not blame you, Dashing Charlie, after all; but there are some crooked fellows here who say the men you killed should be avenged."

"Then there are a number of men who believe still that you are playing this *double racket* yourself," said Poker Paul.

"And there is considerable feeling against me then?"

"Yes, so you must be more than careful."

"Yes, there are a number who still want old Matt's gold, and they will give you trouble if they can," Remsen said.

"Well, they'll not get the miner's gold, they may be sure of that; but, Remsen, I wish to give you an order for provisions to put up, and you can deliver them to Rifle Ben when they are ready."

"All right, Dashing Charlie, when will you want them?"

"Have them ready and I'll send Rifle Ben for them when they are needed."

"All right."

"Now have you any pack-mules?"

"Yes, some fine ones."

"Well, I will need half a dozen, with pack-saddles also."

"I'll have them for you."

"Give me your bill for all, and I'll pay it any time."

"I have no fear of you, Charlie."

"Yes; but this is not my picnic."

"You do the paying, though."

"Yes, for another."

"Now I believe there is nothing else, so I'll be off, only, if you see my Double again, catch him for me—N, let me do that, upon second thought, for I wish the fun of it."

And, throwing himself upon his horse, Dashing Charlie rode out of the camps.

He did not take the trail to the miner's cabin, but rode on up the valley toward a group of cabins where half a hundred miners had located their homes.

Before one of these cabins he halted, and a man came forth to meet him.

He was a man of herculean build, dressed in buckskin, even to his moccasins, and wore on his head a wildcat-skin hat, the tail hanging down his back.

He had a belt-of-arms about his waist, and though at home, carried his rifle swung to his back.

In fact, he was never seen without it, and so had gained the name of Rifle Ben.

His face was heavily bearded, his hair very long, but there was manliness and courage in every feature, and he had a smile as sweet as a woman's though eyes that flashed like a tiger's in anger.

The man smiled in his pleasant way as he saw who his visitor was, and said:

"Glad to see you, Dashing Charlie—come for me?"

"Not yet, Rifle Ben; I only came to say that I wish you to go to Remsen's the fourth night from this and get the provisions he has there for me."

"Also half a dozen pack-mules and saddles."

"Go late, so as to get them from his rear door after closing time, and bring them to the cabin of Matt Markham."

"I will be waiting for you there."

"I'll be on hand, Dashing Charlie, on time."

"And the other men, Rifle Ben?"

"They are loafing now, as I am, waiting orders."

"Four of them I want."

"I have 'em ready when you need them."

"When you bring the provisions and mules to the cabin, then be ready to come with your men at a moment's notice."

"Count on me, Dashing Charlie," was the answer.

And the scout rode on his way once more.

He now turned into the trail, leading to

ward the miner's cabin, as he was anxious to remain away too long.

He had no idea that the gold could ever be found, from his own experience in putting it away.

Still he wished to keep near the cabin to be on hand should anything turn up of a disagreeable nature.

As he drew near the cabin he saw something white sticking upon the door.

Drawing nearer, he discovered it to be a placard, but he rode on by and put his horse in the valley where the animal belonging to Captain Markham was feeding.

"Well, you are safe, old fellow, whoever has been here to call in my absence," he said, as he led the horses to water.

Then he made his way rapidly toward the cabin, and stopped before the door while he gazed at the card thereon.

It was a sheet of white paper, stuck on with wooden pegs.

Upon it was written, in a bold hand and in red ink, as follows:

"DOOMED!"

"Dashing Charlie is hereby warned that his doom is sealed."

"Night and day he will be shadowed, and at the right time the blow will be struck that lays him low."

"Would he save his life let him leave the mining country within three days, for his purpose in coming here is known."

"Let him heed this warning, the first, the last, or suffer the terrible consequences."

MUELLO THE MEXICAN."

Dashing Charlie's face flushed as he read this, and from between his set teeth came the words:

"A threatened man is long-lived."

"I heed no warnings, and I remain."

"I did hope to return to Texas with Captain Markham, but now I shall remain here."

"I will burn the cabin as poor old Markham requested should be done over his grave, but the cave over yonder is good enough for me, and here I shall stay."

CHAPTER XLVII.

THE BORDER TRAMP.

WHEN Muello, the Mexican, discovered that Dashing Charlie had foiled him, that he had slipped through his lines with Richard Markham, it will be remembered that he sent his men to a retreat while he rode on toward the camp.

He half thought that if the two men had attempted to flank his ambush by going down the stream that they had lost their lives.

He therefore was anxious to know, and if so, the chances were still in his favor of securing the gold of Matt Markham.

He would not yield this up for a great deal, no matter what the danger and hardship before him.

So he rode on his way toward the valley camps.

He seemed to know his way well, for he found no difficulty in following the trail.

At length he left the beaten track and rode on up the mountain, turning squarely off to the right.

A ride of half a mile brought him to a cabin situated in a small clearing.

It was a small hut, not over eight feet square, had a stone chimney, and was built against a cliff.

The view in his front was an extensive one, looking as it did directly down upon the valley camps.

Before the door of the hut sat a man with long iron-gray beard and hair.

He was known as Hunter Dave, and from digging no gold out of the mines, had taken to hunting, selling game to the miners who had no time to hunt themselves.

He had a surly face and looked like anything but a boon companion.

"Well, cap'n?" he said with a growl, though he arose and saluted as the outlaw chief rode up to his door.

"What news have you, Dave?" asked the chief, unmindful of his salute.

"Nothin', unless it be that old Markham is dead."

"Dead?" cried the chief in a startled way.

"Yas, I seen a man two hours ago as said he heerd he was dead, cap'n."

"Well, I will soon know about it, for I am going to the camps."

a man came out who bore no resemblance whatever to him.

It was apparently a man with a heavy iron-gray beard and long hair.

He had a hump upon his rounded shoulders, wore an old blue blanket coat, slouch hat much tattered, and corduroy pants patched here and there, the ends being stuck in a pair of heavy rawhide boots.

He had a pair of iron-rimmed spectacles, and a dirty silk handkerchief was tied about his neck as though he was cold.

His hands were dirt-begrimed, and he looked like a perfect border tramp.

He carried an old rifle and a pair of antiquated revolvers, in addition to which he had an Indian scalping-knife and hatchet.

Upon the back of his saddle was a roll of blanket and a canvas-bag for provisions, and altogether man, horse and outfit were most sorry-looking indeed.

"How do I strike you now, Dave?" he said, as he mounted his horse.

"O, you'll do, cap'n, if some fellow don't see through yer rig some day."

"I'll risk it."

"When will you be back ag'in, Cap?"

"Look for me at any time, and don't leave until I return."

"I wishes yer'd fetch me a leetle provisions back with yer, cap'n, for I is about out o' grub."

"Always begging, Dave, you are; but I won't forget you."

With this the man rode away on his daring visit into the mining valley, for, disguised though he was, he ran great risks from the many keen-eyed men there.

His disguise, however, was perfect, for the straggling, bushy, unkempt wig of iron-gray hair which he wore completely concealed the fact that his beard was false, aided also by the silk moustier about his neck.

Then, too, the hump on his back looked natural, and altogether he looked like a creature to commiserate.

Down toward the valley he rode, and as he neared the camps he suddenly came upon Dashing Charlie riding in the same direction.

"Hell, Tramp Tom! I have not seen you for a week of Sundays," called out the scout, as he caught sight of the man who was known as Tramp Tom and the Border Tramp.

Who he was no one appeared to know, but at regular intervals he would come to the mines and always as a beggar, while it is needless to say that he as regularly received financial aid from the miners.

"No; I has been on my rounds of the mines, Dashing Charlie, a-working hard."

"I agree with you, for it is hard work to have nothing to do but to eat, sleep and roam about; but here is my quota, Tramp Tom, for I know you are bu'sted."

And the scout handed him a two-dollar bill.

"Dead broke, Charlie dear, as I allus is."

"Yer see, I is a perambulatin' missionary for the Salvation Army, and has ter send my collections to them for ther heathen, 'ceptin' a small percentage I keeps."

"Yes, a healthy missionary you are, Tramp Tom; but I don't believe there is any harm in you."

"Good-by, for I must go on, and that is not exactly a race-horse you are mounted on."

"Not exactly, Charlie; but he'll git thar all ther same of yer gives him time."

"I'll see yer later, Charlie—

"Day-day," and the man waved his hand to the scout as the latter hastened on toward the camps.

The mission of Dashing Charlie to the camps has already been seen, in his visit to Poker Paul, Remsen, the doctor and Racket Rob, after which he returned to the cabin of Matt Markham to find the placard upon the door, threatening him with an unknown doom.

Had the scout seen the Border Tramp turn back, after he galloped on ahead he would have known the one who placed that placard there.

But he held not a suspicion against the seeming old vagabond.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

THE BORDER TRAMP ON A TRAIL.

WHEN Dashing Charlie had passed on, the outlaw who was playing so well the part of a Border Tramp, rode on after him for a short distance.

Then he wheeled and rode back on the trail the scout had come.

"So he did foil me after all, did slip through my fingers!"

"Well, he brought the miner's brother with him, and that means that he will take the fortune back to Texas with him."

"So be it, for it will suit my plans the better."

"And old Matt Markham is dead, is he?"

"Died in bed after all!"

"Well, he has missed many a chance to die with his boots on."

"He has escaped all my plotting."

"I could have killed him a score of times, yes, had no bad that many lives; but with his death the secret would have gone with him of where his gold was buried."

"The old miner always had a little gift of

gold for Tom the Border Tramp, so I will go by and give a call, pretending I do not know he is dead."

"Maybe after all he is not."

"Some one will be there, though, and can give me full particulars."

"Then I can go to the camps, rake in a little cash and more news, for my spy there must have news for me of some kind."

And so musing the man rode on along the trail which Dashing Charlie had come. It led him to the cabin of the dead miner.

"All seems deserted there," he muttered.

But up to the door he rode, dismounted and hailed.

No answer came.

He hailed again.

The result was the same.

"Gone, certain," he said, and hitching his horse, he began to look about him.

"Ah! hundreds of tracks here."

"Then he is dead, and the miners have been to his funeral."

"What does that mean?"

"The door is all stained with blood, and see how the logs here are filled with bullets."

"There has been hot work here I am sure."

"The old miner died with his boots on, after all, I judge, or appearances here are deceiving."

"Let me see what it was all about—if I can."

He moved about slowly and thoughtfully, but after some time shook his head as though the reading of the sign was beyond him, splendid plainsman though he was.

"Where is his brother, I wonder?"

"The door is locked, that is certain, but I must find out by a trip to the camps."

"That man's gold I will not lose."

"He is dead, his place is deserted, and I have to strike a trail to solve the mystery."

"Ah! there is a horse staked out in the valley."

He went quickly down toward the home of Captain Markham and examined closely.

"Well, this is a fine animal, and his being staked out there proves that some one is coming back."

"Dashing Charlie had just come from here, he was going to the camps, and he will return, that is certain."

"I will also go to the camps, as soon as I have taken a closer look about, now that there is no one here to observe me."

"This trail leads somewhere."

It led him to the deserted cave, and he glanced curiously about him.

"I guess this was the old man's home until he built his cabin," he muttered, little dreaming that the coveted gold he sought was within a few feet of his head.

But there was nothing to indicate the cave overhead, and so he retraced his way to the cabin.

Then he took from his pocket a sheet of paper, a small bottle of ink and a pen.

Seating himself upon a bench, he wrote the placard that the reader knows of, and, cutting some pegs of wood, stuck it upon the door.

Then he took great pains to obliterate his own and the hoof-tracks of his horse.

He at last accomplished this, and mounting far down on the trail, rode on toward the mining-camps.

He did not care to meet Dashing Charlie again, so made his way by another trail, passing in doing so the cabin of Rifle Ben, who gave him a few dollars in charity.

As he rode on, he espied Dashing Charlie coming along the very trail he had taken to avoid him.

Quickly he sought cover, and remained there until Dashing Charlie passed by.

"How easily I could pick him off."

"But I dare not."

"No, I must bide my time; and all things come to those who wait."

When Dashing Charlie had passed by on his way to see Rifle Ben, and not suspecting a foe lurked so near, the Border Tramp again mounted his horse and rode on.

He made his way straight to the tavern and put up his horse in the stable, while he asked for a room.

This he always got, the landlord giving this much to charity in taking care, as he believed, of a poor vagabond, a homeless wretch hastening on to the grave, and one who did not often impose upon his kindness.

That night found Tom, the Border Tramp, in the Den of Destiny, watching the gambling and coming in for a present from any miner who won a good stake.

It was midnight when he left the Den of Destiny, and, going to the stable, mounted his horse and rode away muttering to himself:

"Yes, I have found out all I wish to know; and now to capture that gold on its way to Texas."

CHAPTER XLIX.

PAVING THE WAY.

THE return of Captain Richard Markham to the cabin of his brother was welcomed by the scout with pleasure.

He understood more thoroughly than did any

one else the danger in keeping the gold of the dead miner in such close proximity to the Mountain Marauders.

He also knew that the greatest care must be resorted to in getting the treasure away from the mine.

There were a number of the more lawless of the men in the mines who would be only too glad of a chance to get hold of the gold under any pretext whatever.

Matt Markham had been the most successful miner of them all, and he had held aloof from the others.

He had sought no favors, mingled with none of them and had been very silent about the gold he was getting.

He did not drink or gamble, and hence with many he was disliked.

His brother was a stranger, and he came to take the gold away from the mines, so was at once unpopular.

Then his coming had caused bloodshed and so altogether the miners felt bitterly toward one they unjustly regarded as a man who came to deprive them of gold which they held no claim on whatsoever.

In addition to this feeling of ugliness on the part of the miners, Dashing Charlie knew that the Mountain Marauders would be far more anxious than ever to get hold of the rich prize.

His experience in going to Texas and returning, had shown him how closely on the watch the outlaws were for the treasure.

The placard on the cabin door dooming him to an unknown fate told him that they were about, and he was well aware that they had spies in the camps who would report all the movements of those who were to guard the treasure.

Muello the Marauder was a dangerous man, a skillful commander, and had a good force of men ready to obey his bidding, and that all of them were in the vicinity of the trails going southward, recent occurrences had proven.

So it was that under these circumstances, all things considered, Dashing Charlie was most anxious to have the captain return from the fort and depart with his treasure.

When the ranchero did arrive, and under a strong escort, at whose head was Lieutenant Gibbs, Dashing Charlie felt that the removal of the treasure was an easy matter, for he supposed the soldiers would be a guard.

But a few words dissipated this idea, and the scout knew that the young officer must obey the orders given him and return at once to the fort.

That night in the cabin the affair was talked over between the scout, the officer and the ranchero.

The young lieutenant would have given much to have gone as the escort of the ranchero, but could not do so without proper authority, yet said:

"I will make a scout through the range and see if I cannot scatter or scare these outlaws so that you can follow unmolested."

"I thank you, lieutenant, but Dashing Charlie has secured for me a most competent guide, with four good men besides, so there will be six of us, and I hardly believe that the outlaws would dare attack that many."

"Oh yes, Muello will dare do anything to gain his ends, Captain Markham, and I would be glad to get a force double the number you will have, only there are so few men who would take the trail whom you can trust, as your escort might prove your robbers."

"Yes, there is danger of that," the lieutenant said.

"Well, I must take the chances at any rate, for I am anxious to get back home, as my daughter will be most anxious about my long stay, for we will be able to only make short journeys each day on the return."

"I can vouch for Rifle Ben, Captain Markham, and the men you will have, and I did think it would be well to start back with the lieutenant and thus make the show that the military was to guard you."

"The very thing, and I'll stretch a point and go as far as I possibly can," announced the officer.

"No, I will not ask that, lieutenant," remarked Captain Markham; "I know that there is a special review and drills called at the fort, and you'll just have time to return for them, while it is necessary for you to be there."

"No, we will start together and that will give the idea that I am to have an escort, so I will anticipate no further trouble."

Dashing Charlie sat silently for a moment, lost in deep thought.

At last he said:

"I think that I have a plan that may be a good one."

"Out with it, Charlie," said Lieutenant Gibbs.

"Yes, we are open to all good suggestions, Emmett," the ranchero remarked, and he added:

"I know that you are full of them too."

"Now I know this Mexican Muello to be a very cunning man, and he would suspect the blind regarding the soldier escort I am sure, and follow with his force to strike when you have left the outfit, lieutenant."

"Very true."

"Now my plan is to outwit him by cunning, for we can send a few men with the soldiers, having pack-mules and all, and they, being light, can push rapidly ahead, make a flank movement and regain the camps, while you, captain, can lie in hiding here with your party, and, after the others have gone I will guide you on your way by the lower trail."

"The very thing," cried the officer and ranchero together.

"Dashing Charlie, you are a trump," added Lieutenant Gibbs.

CHAPTER L. THE SCOUT'S RUSE.

HAVING hit upon a plan to elude the outlaws with the gold train, it was talked over carefully, and Dashing Charlie made some valuable suggestions.

"In the first place, Captain Markham, though it will be more expensive by a few hundred dollars, it will be safest."

"The expense is nothing, Dashing Charlie, even if it were thousands, for the situation is a peculiar one."

"Here is a fortune of little less, I believe, than a quarter of a million dollars, laid aside by my brother in the very heart of a land where every man's hand seems to be raised to grasp it by foul means."

"He has willed it to my daughter, and it has to be moved, cost it ever so much, and taken in safety to the bank in Texas."

"Now it will not do to take any big risks, with Muello and his men watching us like hawks, so just suggest your plan and I am ready to acquiesce."

"Then, Captain Markham, I will do away with the idea of economy, which I was working on for you, and tell you just what my ideas are."

"Do so, please."

"Now I can go to Rifle Ben's to-night and have him get a good man to start at once for Texas as a messenger, you sending by him a letter to your daughter to dispatch Mustang Walter and about a dozen of his cowboys to meet you at Cliff Canyon, as you will have other dangers to face, you know, after you get out of reach of the outlaws."

"Very true."

"This courier must push ahead with all the speed he can, and have the cowboys make good time back to the Cliff Canyon."

"This will give you a support, something to push forward to in case of danger, and which a foe would not expect you to find."

"The very thing, Dashing Charlie, so start a good man and pay him his price," said the ranchero.

"Of course you do not care for the best of men in this blind of going with Lieutenant Gibbs; but the leader must know the truth, the others suspecting that they have the gold along."

"A good idea."

"And the leader must resemble you, Captain Markham, as much as possible, and have four men with him."

"Can it be arranged to-night, think you, Dashing Charlie, for I must start back to-morrow," the lieutenant said.

"Yes, sir."

"But the pack-mules?"

"I did not know how many would be needed, to go light, so Remsen has enough for use."

"I can send those needed for the blind here in the morning, the others coming to-morrow night under Rifle Ben."

"We, the captain and I, can lie in hiding here until Rifle Ben comes with his men and the mules, and we can load up at night and slip away."

"But about the cabin, Dashing Charlie?"

"It must be set on fire when the soldiers leave and the pretended gold-train."

"You are right, so I leave all in your hands," was the ranchero's answer.

Dashing Charlie soon after mounted his horse and was about to ride away, when he saw three horsemen approaching.

He at once waited for them.

One was Doctor Quick, and the other two he recognized as two of the worst desperadoes in the mines, and the boon friends of Peter Parker, who had led the attack against him and thereby lost his life at the hands of the scout.

The scout called out to Captain Markham and Lieutenant Gibbs to remain out of sight, and as the doctor rode up with the others, he remarked:

"Well, Doc, come for your pay, have you?"

"I have, and I want all that is due me, and at once."

"Every dollar due you shall be paid, not a cent more or less."

"I told you how many visits I had made, and medicines I had furnished."

"Yes, and lied, for I had a spy on your movements and know the exact number, for Matt Markham kept a tally also of each visit."

"As for the medicines, there is not a bottle here that has not the label of the store pasted on it."

"Your bill is four hundred and ninety-nine

dollars, just, and that sum I will pay you at once."

"I've got to have the thousand, Dashing Charlie."

"How are you going to get it?"

"I'll get it."

"Not from me, for I will not consent to have you rob Matt Markham's heir."

"Do you refuse to pay it?"

"I do, and let me say just here, Old Rhubarb, that you cannot play any game of bluff with me."

"I know why you brought these two men with you, but it will not work, for I am not to be frightened, and I advise you to take your money and go, carrying your paid hirelings with you, for you will surely regret it if you do not."

"Who will cause me to regret it?"

"I will."

"See here, Dashing Charlie, you is gittin' too cheeky to live in these parts," said one of the men with the doctor.

"So says I, for he needs his claws clipped," the other remarked.

"Well, as I wish no trouble I'll show my hand, Doc—

"Lieutenant Gibbs!"

"Ay, ay, Dashing Charlie," and the young officer appeared in the door of the cabin.

"It may be necessary to call upon you for aid, so will you please give a signal with your bugle?"

Lieutenant Gibbs was his own bugler and he was about to place the bugle to his lips when the doctor called out:

"Never mind, Dashing Charlie, there is no need o' soldiers coming, for I'll take the pay you offer and go."

"I am a man of peace and want no trouble."

CHAPTER LI. THE ARRANGEMENT.

DASHING CHARLIE broke out into hearty laughter at the sudden change of the doctor from his attitude from war to peace.

"You are very wise, Doc."

"You have a great head upon your shoulders, I admit."

"But you should have known at first that a game of bluff does not win with me."

"Now if you had looked down the canyon yonder, you would have seen a camp of cavalry-men and saved yourself a world of trouble and a square back-down."

"Captain Markham!"

"Yes."

The ranchero appeared in the door.

"Please pay this Sawbones just four hundred and ninety-nine dollars, the exact amount of his exorbitant bill against your brother."

"His bill I cut down about half, for he sought to rob you."

"Here they are, Dashing Charlie," and the ranchero handed over the bills.

"Now, Doc, I want you to understand that Captain Markham starts to-morrow with his treasure, and the lieutenant here and his men start with him, so just mention it around; if you or your pals expect to get that gold there will surely be a mistake made."

"Who wants the gold?"

"You do, but you have not the courage to try and get it."

"Now I do not go, so expect to see me around the camps for some time yet."

"I don't want to see you," growled the doctor.

"No, but you may some time; now don't you think that you and your two desperate pards had better levant, or Lieutenant Gibbs may be tempted to take you to the fort with him as ~~keepers~~?"

This was hint enough and the doctor quickly wheeled his horse and rode away accompanied by his pards.

The doctor was mad clean through, for he had missed forcing his whole bill from Dashing Charlie, had not precipitated trouble to kill him as he had hoped to do, and more, discovered that he must give up all idea of capturing the gold if the soldiers were going as an escort.

When the three men had departed Lieutenant Gibbs remarked:

"Well, Charlie, you have a way of managing these fellows that is remarkable."

"You must fight the Devil with fire, lieutenant, it is said," was the laughing response, and the scout rode away upon his mission to visit Rifle Ben.

He found the miner at home and said to him quickly:

"See, here, Ben, I have concocted a plan, to get that gold in safety to Texas and you must aid me in it."

"Just command me, Dashing Charlie, in all that I can do."

"Do you know a man who knows the trails between here and Texas, has a good horse, and is a fearless fellow?"

"I do."

"Who is he?"

"Texas Charlie."

"Ah, yes, I know of him."

"He is a good one."

"So I have heard; but where is he?"

"At his lay-out."

"How far from here?"

"About a mile."

"Well, here is a letter and it is fully addressed, so start him with it at once and tell him not to spare his horse, for he can get a fine one in return at the other end of his trail."

"Yes."

"Tell him to come back with the men he goes after and leave them at Cliff Canyon."

"I understand."

"Now, can you get me five more men to-night?"

"What for?"

"As an escort."

"I will not vouch for more than one of them."

"It makes no difference; but I want them to go to Remsen's, get four mules there, with provisions for a long trail, and to-morrow go on to Matt Markham's cabin."

"For the gold."

"Not they, but to make believe, only they must not know the difference."

"If you can rig one of these fellows up to look like me, and another to appear to be, at a casual glance, Captain Markham, so much the better."

"They are to start with the soldiers now at the cabin, but will be left by them when the cavalry branch off to go to the fort, and your leader of the party must be instructed to push on with all speed for several days, and then, by a flank movement, return to the camps here."

"I don't just catch your plan, Dashing Charlie."

"You will when I tell you to come to-morrow night with your men, one by one, and your pack-mules, to the cabin of Matt Markham, and I will join you there with Captain Markham, and have the gold ready for you."

"Ahi I see now how it is."

"We are to be the real escort?"

"Yes."

"That's a plot of your getting up, I'll swear."

"Well, I had something to do with it."

"And Muello will make Rome howl when he catches up with the gang and finds they have no gold."

"If he catches them, yes; but they must not be caught, if possible to avoid it."

"If Muello did get away with some of them, it would be no loss; but the leader will be a good fellow, and I trust he will get through all right."

"Then you understand what is to be done?"

"Exactly."

"Well, here is the money to pay the courier to the Markham Ranch, and the leader of this other band for himself and men."

"Now, when can you start?"

"Within five minutes."

"And you might send me a line by the man who comes to-morrow with his squad and pack-mules to the cabin, telling me if Texas Charlie got off all right."

"I'll do it, Dashing Charlie, and I'll be on time to-morrow night."

"I know that. Good-night!" and Dashing Charlie started upon his return to the miner's cabin.

CHAPTER LII. A FALSE START.

IT was late when Dashing Charlie returned to the cabin.

But he found the lieutenant and Richard Markham awaiting him and anxious to know the result of his mission.

"It is all arranged, for Rifle Ben has gotten Texas Charlie off before this with your letter, Captain Markham, and he's a man to go there with all speed, so the cowboys, under their chief, Mustang Walter, will be there at the Cliff Canyon some time before you can get there."

"That is good."

"But the others?"

"Rifle Ben was to then get five men for the pretended escort, and they come here to-morrow from the camps with the pack-mules; but only the leader is to be in the secret that they are not to carry the gold, and we will make up some canvas-bags of rocks for them early in the morning."

The three laughed over the cheat, and soon after retired for the night.

But they were up bright and early, and when later Dandy Nick and his men arrived, they found all in readiness for them.

Dandy Nick brought a note from Rifle Ben that Texas Charlie had started soon after he saw him, and that all else was arranged.

Dashing Charlie saw also that Dandy Nick at a distance might be mistaken for himself, while Rifle Ben had rigged up one of the men to resemble somewhat the ranchero.

The men seemed to be very proud of their position as escort for the gold, and put the bags of rocks in the pack-saddles with the air of men who felt every bit of their importance.

The mules were fair animals, and when all was ready Dashing Charlie said, aloud, so that the men all heard him:

"You understand your orders, Dandy Nick, so push on after the soldiers leave you with all haste."

"The captain and I will go by another trail to draw off some of the outlaws in pursuit of us; but we will join the gold-train in good time."

"Now, are you ready?"

"All ready," said Dandy Nick.

"My men are waiting, Captain Markham," and Lieutenant Gibbs rode up to the group.

Richard Markham hesitated.

It was hard for him to apply the torch to his brother's home and leave but a monument of ashes over his grave.

The others saw his feeling and Dashing Charlie said:

"Shall I set the cabin on fire, sir?"

"I wish that you would do it, Dashing Charlie, for I cannot."

The scout at once looked in the cabin, to see that nothing was there that they cared to have removed, and then built the fire that was to set it ablaze.

The door was locked then and handing the large key to the ranchero, Dashing Charlie said:

"Present this key to your daughter, please, Captain Markham, from me."

"I will gladly do so, Charlie."

Then the flames began to kindle, and as they mounted higher and higher, Dashing Charlie said:

"We must seek our hiding-place now."

So farewells were said to Lieutenant Gibbs, Dandy Nick and the soldiers, and the command started on its way.

For a few moments Dashing Charlie and Richard Markham stood regarding the burning cabin, and then they hastened away to their horses waiting down the valley.

The scout led the way at a gallop and soon came to a deep canyon through which wound a stream.

Into this they turned and continued on until they found a retreat most secure.

"Now here we can hide until night, when we will return to the cabin to await for Rifle Ben and his men," the scout said.

The ranchero seemed deeply impressed by the burning of the cabin, for it was a shock to him to see it burn down over the grave, though it was carrying out the dying request of his brother.

"You think many will come to the fire, Dashing Charlie?"

"Oh, yes, the miners will see the blaze and smoke and run to the scene, if only from curiosity for it is generally known that your brother wished his cabin burned down over him."

"And they will believe that the gold has been removed?"

"Without doubt, sir, and Muello's spies will report the fact to him, and if Dandy Nick and his men do not push along they will get into trouble, sure."

"Did it strike you that the escort under Dandy Nick might themselves conclude to take the gold?"

Dashing Charlie gave a long whistle.

"No, I had not thought of that; but what a row there will be if they do turn traitor and find out how they have been sold," and the thought was most amusing to the scout, whose hearty laughter was contagious as the ranchero also joined in the merriment.

CHAPTER LIII.

THE GATHERING OF THE CLANS.

As Dashing Charlie had predicted, the smoke was a signal far and wide that the cabin of Matt Markham the dead miner was afire.

The flames burned fiercely, sending up volumes of smoke high in air, and far up and down the valley it was seen by the miners.

One by one and in crowds they flocked to the scene.

Most of them, if not all, knew that it had been the last wish of the dead miner to have his home burned over his grave.

But the burning of the cabin down over the grave of its former owner was something new to the miners, and they flocked to see it.

His cabin had been broken into time and again when he was away, and every foot about it searched diligently, but all with no result.

Now his cabin was going up in flames and the miners felt anxious to see what was being done with the gold, how it was being carried away, and in what quantity and by whom they wished to know.

So the clans gathered, from the scattered bivouacs, the valley camps, the single houses and the miners, all making their way toward the central point of interest, poor Matt Markham's burning house.

The first man to arrive almost was Hunter Dave.

He looked with deep interest at the cabin in flames, rode over to where the soldiers had been encamped, examined the trails all about, and then started off at a sweeping gallop, right on the track of the party who had left.

He soon reached a high range, which commanded a view of the valley trail for several miles.

What he saw caused him to say:

"There goes the gold, and the soldiers are guarding it."

"But they will not go far, oh no!"

"United States soldiers don't guard any but Government gold."

"But the chief must know this, and I'll take the short cut through the mountains."

And away sped Hunter Dave at the full speed of his horse.

The next to come upon the scene were Doctor Quick and Racket Rob, but they reached there hardly a minute ahead of a group of excited miners.

"What does it mean, Doc?" whispered Racket Rob.

"It means that the Texan carried out his brother's wishes, burned the shanty, and has got the soldiers to guard his gold on its way to the banks."

"Then that settles it for us?"

"I am not so sure."

"What do you mean by that, Doc, for it looks done for us from my observation?"

"I have just six men engaged to take the trail, and you and I make eight."

"Against twenty-odd soldiers and a guard of miners."

"See here, the miners would not be taken along if the soldiers were to go all the way."

"That's so."

"They will go slow, for soldiers always do, so we can overtake them."

"I can send one of the men ahead to scout out the situation, and when the soldiers leave them, then we can catch up—see?"

"Doc, you are a trump."

"So you are with me?"

"I am, for with the prize in view I won't mind my arm and the bite of that infernal horse."

"Then keep your eyes skinned and see what you can discover in the way of signs."

"I'll do it, Doc."

And so the two walked about looking for "signs," caught every word that was of interest to them from the gathering clans, and soon after slipped quietly away, convinced that they stood a good chance of getting the gold after all, for the doctor had notified his men to meet that night at Racket Rob's cabin ready for a long trail.

CHAPTER LIV.

ON THE WAY.

THE miners gathered about Matt Markham's burning cabin with the deepest interest.

They talked over the situation in all its details, discussed the battle held there some days before between themselves and Dashing Charlie, argued the pros and cons of the affair, and many of them decided that they were glad that the bone of contention, the gold of Matt Markham, was at last removed beyond the limits of the Valley Mines.

There were hundreds of them there, and many were the stories told of the dead miner, which led to talks of Dashing Charlie's daring and his mysterious motive for dwelling in the Valley Mines, when he certainly got but little money out of it.

Little did any of them dream that they were within a hundred yards of the much-coveted gold, and that not two miles away were the ranchero and Dashing Charlie.

Poker Paul was there, also Remsen, and Rifle Ben put in an appearance as the last log sunk down into the bed of coals.

Strongly built of heavy logs, large, for it had two rooms, the cabin had burned for a long while.

The furniture had been piled up in the center, over the grave, and there was a heap of burning coals, a fiery monument over the dead.

At last interest waned and the miners began to drop away, one by one returning to their work.

Toward noon all had disappeared except two hard-faced individuals, who cut long poles and began to poke about in the embers, hoping to find something of value, perhaps a chunk of gold forgotten by the old miner and the hiding-place of which was unknown to Richard Markham or Dashing Charlie.

But as they poked about in the hot coals, there came a distant crack of a rifle and the chug of a bullet in the hot embers.

The men started and dropped their long poles.

As they did so another crack was heard, and a bullet passed between them and knocked the coals about in too close proximity to be pleasant.

"Jack, that means us," cried one.

"It do, pard."

"Let us git."

"If I c'e'u'd only find ther galoot thet—"

But he did not finish the sentence for a third shot came, the bullet cutting close to the heads of both men.

Away they went like race-horses down the hill and soon disappeared from sight.

As they ran away from over on the hill from whence had come the shots, a hearty laugh was heard, followed by the words:

"Look at them go, captain."

"Yes, they are sprinters and no mistake," was the answer.

"Well, I knew they were just the two to camp there until the ashes cooled and then sit it through their fingers, so I gave them the hint."

"And they took it."

Dashing Charlie laughed again and then said:

"Now let us return to our horses, for by the time we have had supper and gotten to the cavern, it will be dark."

"And your men will arrive soon after?"

"Yes, sir."

The two then returned from the spur from where they had been in hiding watching the gathering of the miners, and reaching the canyon cooked supper and then, just at sunset, started for the burned cabin.

The horses were staked out in the valley, and then the scout led the way to the cavern, which Captain Markham had not yet visited.

Dashing Charlie had a lantern, and it revealed the ingenious trap hiding the opening in the rocky roof.

The bags of gold were lowered one by one, and carried to a point not far from the cabin, the scout doing the work while the ranchero stood guard.

Then the two sat down to await the coming of Rifle Ben, all being left at the cavern as before.

It was not very long before through the darkness a horseman was seen riding up toward the cabin.

The coals still glowed brightly, shedding light about for some distance, and as the horseman drew near it, Dashing Charlie called out:

"Ho, Ben!"

"Yes, Dashing Charlie."

The miner rode toward them, and as he dismounted Dashing Charlie said:

"Captain Markham, I wish to introduce to you my friend, Rifle Ben, a man to tie to every time, and who, had he been at the fight here the other day, would have stood by us to the end."

The ranchero greeted the miner cordially, and then Dashing Charlie asked about the men.

"They are coming by separate trails, sir, and each one brings a pack-mule."

"I brought two and hitched them down the hill yonder, for I thought it best to be cautious."

Before long the men began to arrive, and as they came up the gold-bags were securely packed in the saddles, the provisions and camping-traps being already strapped on at the store.

"Now, Rifle Ben, we are ready, and as I go with you for some distance, I will act as guide until you take charge," and Dashing Charlie rode to the front, Captain Markham joined him, and the gold-train moved slowly away forever from the home of the dead miner.

CHAPTER LV.

THE PLOTTERS FOR GOLD.

DOCTOR QUICK was a man of resources, and of courage if he saw any great gain to be made by a display of his pluck.

What had driven him, a man of really great talent, a fugitive to the frontier, he kept to himself; but having begun to make money, the greed for gold became a mania with him, and he registered a mental vow that he would possess the riches of Matt Markham.

So it was that he made a boon companion of another villain, Racket Rob, and then enlisted in his service half a dozen others, all of them of the worst kind of desperado stripe.

These men were born scamps, he knew, and that they would cut his throat for the gold to be gotten he did not doubt; so he engaged them with a certain view which will appear later on.

They were employed for so much down in cash and a promised liberal percentage in the gold to be gotten.

Racket Rob was nominally a partner on half shares with the doctor, but, whether Old Rhubarb took this view of the case will also be shown later.

He saw for himself riches to be gained by one fell swoop, and, as for the means used to gain his gold, he would care nothing once it was in his hands.

After leaving the burning cabin, Doctor Quick made his way with Racket Rob back to his home.

Then Racket Rob was told to go to certain cabins and make a certain sign with chalk on the door of each.

This was the doctor's signal to his men that they were wanted at midnight at his home, and to come prepared for a long trail.

Racket Rob was then told to make his preparations for leaving home, perhaps forever.

Old Rhubarb began his arrangements then for an unlimited stay.

He had sent his earnings as he got them to a bank, so had a handsome account to draw against.

But he had kept about him always a buckskin belt in which were a few hundred in ready money for a rainy day.

The doctor told his two Chinese servants that he was going to the fort to get some medicines, and forgot to pay them their wages in case he should never return.

One of the Celestials made a suggestion of this kind, but he recognized the fact that it was not

received with favor when the doctor knocked him down, with the remark:

"You would hoodoo my trip if you could, you salmon-colored nigger."

Racket Rob did not take long, meanwhile, to pack up.

He came to the doctor's for supper, assured of a good meal from past experience.

Later, the men began to arrive, until six had put in an appearance.

Then they mounted and started upon their way, the doctor leading, with Racket Rob by his side.

They flanked the camps, and pushing on at a rapid gait came out in the range at dawn some twenty miles from the cabin of Matt Markham.

"I knew I was right," said the doctor, as he saw the trail of the soldiers escorting the gold-train.

"We are about eighteen hours behind them," said Racket Rob.

"No, we are twenty miles on our journey, and they hardly made over thirty up to dark last night."

"By night we will be close on their trail."

The doctor's prophecy proved the correct one, for when they camped that night they knew that the gold-train was not very far ahead of them.

They had, at noon, discovered the camp of the party, and from there there were two trails.

One of these was left by the soldiers, and branched off to the left.

"I told you so, Racket Rob, the soldiers have gone to the fort, the gold-train has gone on to Texas."

"We are after the gold-train, and it is not very far ahead."

Such was the comment of the doctor, and that night when they camped, the best guide of the lot was sent ahead to locate the camp of those they were in pursuit of.

It was late when he returned, and his report was quickly made.

The party were under the guidance of Dandy Dick he said, and he had counted four men besides.

Of course two of these were Dashing Charlie and the Texan.

The camp was well chosen, but could be gotten close to without trouble, a volley would kill the guards and the gold-train would be at their mercy.

Such was the report of the scout sent to reconnoiter, and the doctor and all at once became greatly excited.

"How far are they from here?" asked the doctor.

"About five miles."

"Then we can get there and be in position to attack before dawn!"

"Yes, sir."

The order was given then to move, and an hour before dawn the doctor and his men were in position and ready for the attack.

CHAPTER LVI.

MUELLO THE MARAUDER STRIKES THE TRAIL.

WHEN Hunter Dave left the scene of the mining cabin, he made his way rapidly along the trail left by the soldiers under Lieutenant Fred Gibbs, and the supposed treasure train.

He did not spare spur, and arrived in the mountain range before sunset, he having branched off by a trail which he knew would lead him to the retreat of the outlaw chief Muello.

In truth Hunter Dave was a spy of the Mountain Marauders in the valley camps, and he now knew that he was the bearer of important news.

He knew well the line of retreats where the Marauders of the mines were generally found, and he only hoped to discover the chief in the first one he came to.

In this, however, he was mistaken.

The chief was not in his favorite retreat.

So he went to the next one, but with a like result.

The third he reached about midnight, and that, too, was empty.

The trail from there was too rough to go by night, and besides his horse was very tired, hence he was forced to rest until daylight.

But as soon as he could see to travel he was again in the saddle and he pushed on as rapidly as the nature of the trail would admit of.

The sun was an hour high when at last he found the Marauders.

They were in a retreat which the chief seldom went to.

The chief was at breakfast, but quickly gave it up to talk with his faithful spy.

Hunter Dave told his story very understandingly and Muello, the Mexican, listened with deepest attention.

"As soon as you came back, sir, from the camps, and got out of your duds as a tramp, I left to see what I could pick up in the way of news."

"I couldn't get a clew that was good for anything until I saw Matt Markham's cabin on fire."

"Then I shot for them as fast as I could, and it did not take me long to learn that sol-

diers had come as an escort for the gold, and they had lighted out after setting fire to the cabin.

"I heard also that Dashing Charlie had secured some men as guards, and this led me to believe they would be only escorted by the soldiers a short way, and from there go on alone.

"I pushed off at once on the trail and came on to the retreats to catch you, but missed you all along until I got here."

"You have done well, Hunter Dave: but I had my men on each trail on the watch, and just now had word from one that the soldiers had branched off to the fort, and the gold-train was pushing for the trail toward Texas, so I gave orders just now to be ready to start.

"You can remain in camp with the outfit, and rest, for I shall only take eight men with me."

"You know the force?"

"On yes; there were twenty soldiers, about, and Dashing Charlie, the ranchero, and three or four others, in the gold-train; but we won't have to fight the soldiers."

"You are sure, sir, they have gone to the fort?"

"Oh yes; but it was after dark when my man saw them pass."

"And he followed them?"

"He is a cunning fellow, and instead of doing as many would have done, come right on and report, he knew that if they were taking the gold to the fort they would branch off not far from where he then was, and so he went to see."

"They divided there, the soldiers holding on, the gold-train going south."

"Then he came to tell me."

"You think you can catch them, sir?"

"Oh yes."

"They have a long start."

"True, but it is a long trail to Texas, Hunter Dave."

"To Texas?"

"Yes."

"Would you go that far?"

"I shall track that gold to the bank in which it is placed for safe-keeping, Hunter Dave, but what I get it," was the determined response of the Marauder of the Mines.

Hunter Dave seemed delighted at this determination upon the part of the chief, and having told him to return to his duty as spy at the Valley Camps, Muello the Mexican mounted his horse and placing himself at the head of his men, rode out of the retreat.

He knew the trail the gold-train was following, and so pushed on across a range to cut off a number of miles, his perfect knowledge of the country enabling him to do so easily.

Toward evening he came into the track running southward and, as he had expected, found that the gold-train had passed.

"We are on the right track," he said, grimly, turning to his men.

"Now that gold is ours!"

CHAPTER LVII.

DOG EAT DOG.

WITH the outfit of Doctor Quick, and the outlaws of Muello, the Mexican, upon the trail of the gold-train, it looked very much as though the party commanded by Dandy Nick were in very bad shape.

They had gone on from the cabin of the dead miner under escort of Lieutenant Fred Gibbs, as is known; but that officer was compelled to return to the fort and hence branched off when he came to the trail he had to take.

He bade Dandy Nick good-by with a few words of warning, though he smiled to himself as he rode on at the thought that the loss of that outfit would perhaps be a great benefit to mankind, the guide excepted.

"If Muello does catch them I would give a month's pay to see his face and hear him swear when he sees the rocks in those pack-saddles."

"It will be as good as a comedy, and I really regret I cannot be an eyewitness of the scene."

So saying he went on his way, while Dandy Nick, the guide, led his men by the trail which would bring them around the range to the river-ford, whence they could strike southward.

Remembering his orders to press on pretty well, Dandy Nick did so, and when they went into camp for the night they had made a good journey thus far.

As he rode along, Dandy Nick had noticed, without appearing to do so, that there was something up with the men.

He was aware that the "treasure" he was guarding was simply the value of the mules and pack-saddles.

He had been let into the secret, though not one of his men suspected that there was a trick in the affair, they being simply made use of and paid to circumvent the outlaws, and save the real treasure from capture.

The more he watched his men the more Dandy Nick became convinced that something was going wrong.

He felt that those whom he was in command of were a very bad lot of citizens, men who had migrated from their former homes for the good of their fellow-citizens.

They were desperadoes in fact, and Dandy Nick knew that they were plotting to get that gold and take his life to do so, feeling assured that they could not get him to join them in the robbery.

So the guide determined to counterplot to save himself, for the rocks could take care of themselves.

He soon began to play sick, and at last said that he was so ill they must camp early.

This they did, and he went off to a secluded spot and made up his bed, telling the men not to disturb him on any account.

From this point of vantage he watched the men get supper, and, unnoticed by them, slipped out from his blankets, left them in the shape of a human form, and stepped around to where his horse was staked out.

He drew the animal a safe distance away, hitched him, and crept back to await developments.

The whole gang were seated around the campfire, the guard having taken advantage of his being sick to desert his post, or perhaps not caring with the prospect before him of very soon being a rich man.

Until late in the night they sat there, and that they were quarreling among themselves Dandy Nick could see.

At last one of the worst of the lot called out:

"Well, I have won it, and I don't care, so here goes, though I does say he's a pretty clever fellow."

With this he turned his ride over to the blankets of Dandy Nick and fired.

Again he fired, this time with a revolver, and again.

"That does for Dandy Nick, and this hain't to be no case o' long division."

"No, two is enough ter share this gold, me and you, Kansas, so let 'em have it."

With this, to the amazement of all but one of the party he turned his revolver upon a man near him and opened fire.

The one he had addressed as Kansas, a tall, raw-boned fellow, sprung for shelter behind a tree and cried:

"I'm with you, pard!"

"Let 'em have it and we gits all."

Though taken by surprise at this act of treachery, the other men drew their weapons and returned the fire.

Instantly a desperate duel with revolvers at close range followed and the rattle of the shots made the timber ring.

Down went one man, still firing, and the ring-leader was next to fall, number three following him very quickly.

In a couple of minutes Kansas was the only man left standing, and he was sheltered by a tree.

But he had been twice slightly wounded.

As he saw his last comrade go down he gave a wild whoop and said:

"It's no division, for I gits it all."

He watched the others slowly for a while, and seeing no movement left the shelter of the tree which had served him so well.

He walked first to one, then the other, and as he saw that all were dead, or dying, he gave another whoop of joy, jumped up into the air, cracking his heels together with delight, and said in a tone full of exultation:

"I gits it all! I is a millionaire!"

"Bully for old Kansas!"

But as he spoke there came the rattle of firearms and the man dropped dead in his tracks.

CHAPTER LVIII.

OTHER GOLD-HUNTERS.

FROM his place of observation in the timber Dandy Nick had been an observer of all that had taken place around the camp-fire.

He saw the fight was waging, but looked coolly on.

"I hope they'll fight it out like the Kilkenny cats," he said, quietly.

When the ringleader went down he was rejoiced and as he saw that Kansas alone remained, he muttered:

"I'll enjoy seeing him open the pack-saddles and then I'll get the mules to take back."

But, as Dandy Nick was congratulating himself upon the result of the fight and planning to save the mules at last, there came from the other side of the camp a volley of shots.

The camp fire was burning brightly, and the guide saw Kansas go down.

He saw, too, a number of men rushing toward the camp, and he at once decided that his strong point would be to take flight.

"The Marauders of the Mines!" he said, as he saw fully half a dozen forms in the arc of the firelight.

And he bounded away like a deer to where he had left his horse.

"I only wish I dared stay and see them open the packs."

"But I do not dare to do so."

"No; Muello is not on this trail without a large force, and my trail will be seen and taken at daylight; so I will light out."

"There is no reason why they should decamp, for these mountains are all alike to them; but I must go; only I would like to see and hear them when they see the prize they have captured."

"Oh! but they'll paint the rocks and kill the foliage hereabout with brimstone."

So Dandy Nick mounted his horse and rode away.

He was very cautious, for he knew well what the Mountain Marauders were, and he did not wish to run upon any of them.

"Well, I feel relieved," he mused, as he rode along.

"If Muello is here, then he will not be on the lower trail, and so the gold train will get through all right, and, if any man can save it, Dashing Charlie can do it.

"But, then, Rifle Ben is the guide.

"Well, he's a good one, none better.

"Wonder if I had not better strike south, head them off and join in the outfit on its way to Texas, for Dashing Charlie don't go, and another man won't be in the way, I'll swear to that.

"Yes, I'll do that and tell the boys the fate of my outfit, how it was dog eat dog, a free-to-all race, an' the devil take the hindmost.

"I'm only sorry I cannot give them an account of how the Marauders liked the rocks.

"Now to head off the gold outfit, and I am sorry I could not save the mules."

So Dandy Nick rode on his way through the night, to join Rifle Ben's party, while back at the camp of the traitors there was a strange scene being enacted.

The men who had brought down the exultant Kansas with a volley were not the Marauders, as Dandy Nick had surmised, and naturally so, for he knew of no other gold-hunters in the field just then.

They were the party under the doctor, who had developed into quite an experienced captain, aided by his disabled lieutenant, Racket Rob.

They had moved upon the camp of the supposed gold-train, guided by the scout who had discovered the camp.

Arriving near the camp and in sight of the fire, they had dismounted and leaving the horses with Racket Rob, on account of his being injured, they pressed on eagerly under the doctor.

Racket Rob did not object to this move, as he felt sure that there would be a hot fight between the force under the doctor and the desperadoes of the gold-train, and he had not been in luck of late and would be very apt to catch a bullet, he was sure.

So, though remonstrating, he did not remonstrate loud enough for it to have any effect, and he accordingly remained in the rear with the horses.

As the doctor and his men reached a point nearer the camp, they discovered that something was wrong.

It was the scene in which the ringleader arose and fired upon what he supposed was the sleeping form of Dandy Nick.

Then followed the revolver duel.

"Good! good! it saves us trouble for them to kill each other, so let them fight it out," shouted the doctor.

At last he gave the order to run in, and all of his men took a shot at Kansas, whose triumph was quickly ended.

Though they had seen him fall, and supposed him to be the last of the band, the doctor advanced with caution.

But when they reached the scene and beheld the dead guards lying around, and then saw the pack-saddles piled up near, they were all seized with the gold fever, and nearly went mad with delight.

When their joy had been slightly tempered down, the doctor began to look about him with considerable curiosity.

"Pards, where is Dashing Charlie's body?" he asked.

"And the Texan's?" added Racket Rob, who had come up to the camp when he saw all was safe.

"That's so! Well, they are absent for some reason, and that was why the guards fought for the gold."

"Come, we must get away and ride hard, too."

"Saddle up, men!"

The men wanted to see the gold, but the doctor warned them of the danger of delaying there, in the country of the Marauders, so they hastened to obey, and in a few moments were dashing along at a fast rate, driving the rock-laden mules with them.

CHAPTER LIX.

THE DOCTOR PLAYS A "LONE HAND."

As they rode along in the darkness, the doctor and Racket Rob were side by side.

The latter had come to admire the doctor as a very great man.

His triumph in capturing the gold-train as he had, made him feel almost awe of one so great.

The more the doctor thought of the fact that the bodies of the ranchero and Dashing Charlie were not found in the camp among the others, the more he was puzzled.

He pondered it over and over, and invited the assistance of Racket Rob and the others in solving the mystery.

"I cannot understand it at all," he said, impressively.

Neither could any of the rest of them, for they certainly supposed that Dashing Charlie and Richard Markham had gone with the gold-train.

"Well, Racket Rob, we have won," said the doctor, in an exultant tone.

"You have won, Doc, for we would have had nothing except for you."

"Well, Rob, what do you think is best to be done with our gold?"

"I would say, light out from the camps and live like gentlemen."

"In a foreign land, yes, for America is not a healthy place for me."

"Nor for me."

"Well, we will go to Cuba, say, or to Europe."

"Say Europe."

"It is a go; but now about these men."

"Yes, Doc."

"I believe that seeing the treachery of those gold-train guards, they may kill us."

"Oh, Lord!"

"It is a surmise, of course, but I fear so."

"I hope not."

"So do I."

"What is to be done?"

"Self-preservation is the first law of nature, Robert."

"Yes, Doc."

Now, these men will doubtless plot against us, knowing that we get the lion's, they the lamb's share of this gold."

"Yes, yes."

"A counterplot is always fair, and so I say we must thwart them."

"How can we?"

"Leave that to me, for I can do it."

"You are a wonderful man, Doc, a wonder, in fact."

"Thanks."

"I mean it."

"Thanks awfully."

"But what makes you suspect these men?"

"Many things."

"I have seen nothing."

"It is too dark to see."

"Well, do as you deem best, for I am with you."

"Good!"

"Now to business."

"Yes."

"You see, if we get rid of these men, we will not have to pay them the promised money."

"And that goes to us?"

"Yes."

"And then?"

"We can play peddlers, loading our horses and mules with anything, and thus reach some place where we can dispose of our gold."

"Yes."

"And sell the animals."

"All goes."

"Yes, they will bring us considerable, and money is what we want."

"Yes, gold, dear, lovely, beautiful, yellow gold."

"I am glad to see you so enthusiastic."

"But see, day is breaking, and we will then see where we can make for the unfrequented parts of the mountain."

"That is so, and then I am anxious to see how you can get rid of these men."

"Without the slightest difficulty, as you will discover," was the reply, in a tone that made Racket Rob shudder, hardened man of crime that he was.

Until the sun was several hours high did the doctor lead his men on, and then only a short halt was made for food, and rest for the tired horses.

Pressing on again until after noon, the doctor seemed to at last have reached a place where he deemed himself safe, and so went at once into camp.

The spot was well chosen, and the country surrounding seemed never to have been trodden by the foot of man.

It was at the base of a lofty spur, and upon the banks of a stream, where there was a bend in the shape of a horseshoe.

"Here we camp, men," said the doctor, and he seemed in the best of humors, to the surprise of Racket Rob, who was nervous at what was before him.

"Now, men, stake the horses out well, for there is no danger here, not even from redskins."

"You are all tired out, and hungry, so we will have a good supper and afterward a long rest."

"Then, too, I have a bottle of something good in which to drink to our fortune, for we have won the yellow metal, men, and plenty of it."

"Don't spare the provisions now, for we must have a feast."

In spite of the doctor's genial manner to the men, Racket Rob thought he noticed an ugly humor in them.

He saw them whispering together, and he began to feel sure that the doctor was right, that they were plotting mischief, and that they would not be long in making some move.

The temptation was great for them to take

the gold which they only expected a small share of, when only the lives of Dr. Quick and Racket Rob stood in the way.

And what were human lives to those desperate men?

Certainly not as much as were the lives of their horses.

But the doctor seemed to feel also that the men were ready for an outbreak, and he kept close to the camp-fire and urged on the cooking of the meal, which was to be a late dinner and early supper.

At last the men were called up by the doctor for their drink in honor of their success.

"Hold out your tin cups, pards," said the man of medicine, with a smile.

This order was of course obeyed with great alacrity.

Then the doctor gave a generous drink all around—so generous, in fact, that he left but a small quantity for himself.

"Never mind me, boys, for I have plenty more."

"See, I have a small flask left, and I'll try a pull at that."

He took the "pull," and the men drank their liquor with a gusto that showed perfect enjoyment in the act.

"Now, pards, we'll have our feast," said the doctor, and all sat down to the meal.

But the doctor was suddenly taken very ill, and as he staggered to his blankets the men gazed at him with wonder at the sudden attack, not hearing his muttered words:

"Now I will play a lone hand in this game, for I hold all the trumps."

CHAPTER LX.

A GAME THAT TWO CAN PLAY.

DOCTOR ZEKIEL QUICK had shown great wisdom in withdrawing from the circle around the camp-fire as he did.

He had simply "played 'possum," for he was not in the least ill.

But he had been guilty of a crime which he did not intend should catch him within revolver-range if he was suspected.

So he had counterfeited illness to a wonderful degree, deceiving every man around the camp-fire with him.

He had retired to his blankets, as had the cunning Dandy Nick of the other gold-hunting band, but not with as praiseworthy a motive.

Reaching his blankets he had dodged away in the thick brush, and from a safe distance watched proceedings.

He did not have very long to wait, for one of the men suddenly fell forward upon his face.

Two started to aid him and they were powerless to do so.

Then one man sprung to his feet and cried out:

"My God, pards! I feel so strange!"

"We have been poisoned!" cried another.

"The doctor has done it!"

"He wanted all the gold for himself!"

"Where is he?"

"Kill him!"

These cries went the rounds rapidly.

But each voice had seemed fainter, and the men who had urged the killing of the doctor had not been able to carry out their threat.

They staggered forward only to fall upon their faces.

Then others rolled in agony upon the ground, while loud curses, prayers and shrieks filled the air.

It was an appalling scene, one never to forget, and yet the perpetrator of the crime stood apart and gazed grimly upon the anguish, mental and physical, of his victims.

He was too accustomed to see men die to shrink from witnessing it now, even though his hand had sent them upon the last long journey that all of us must take.

There he stood, cold, callous of their sufferings, yet gloating at his success.

"They will all die."

"If the poison fails with any one of them, the revolver can finish the work."

"Some of them die hard, and if they would not shoot me I could put them out of their misery by giving them a sedative."

"How quickly Racket Rob keeled over!"

"He was the first to feel it, and he died without a kick."

"Well, he was weakened by his wound, and the injury that horse gave him."

"Ah! they do indeed die hard," and as he spoke, several of the men half arose to their feet.

But only to fall back again and writhe in anguish upon the ground.

At last their struggles ceased, their curses and prayers grew fainter, and the doctor rubbed his hands gleefully as he said:

"Now the gold is mine—yes, all mine."

"What a fortune it will

"Bah! how careless I was to allow any proofs to be found, for it drove me to desertion to save my neck."

"Well, that is over now. Erastus Enders, M. D., Surgeon of the Seventeenth Infantry, is dead, forever dead, while Zekiel Quick, surgeon of the mines, having made a fortune, must now hide himself under another name and live a life of luxury in a foreign land."

"This wig I wear, this pair of spectacles, will have to go, and then I will come out as a man among men once more."

"Now to see if my victims still have a spark of life left."

"Then to behold my gold, and next will I bury it until I can go and get men to come here and guard it to safety for me."

"And I'll get honest men, too, not such cattle as those," and he pointed in a contemptuous way toward his victims.

Revolver in hand, he then moved forward, and bending over the last one whom he had seen show any signs of life, he placed his fingers gently upon the pulse.

"Dead!"

"That settles it with all."

"Now to enjoy my supper, then for a glance at my gold, and afterward for a good night's rest, for this stream will carry these dead reminders of death far from my camp, and I wish no disturbing fancies this night to destroy my sweet and peaceful slumbers."

The man then coolly unbuckled his belt of arms and sat down to eat his dinner.

He had no fear of dead bodies; the living only had he to dread.

And as he sat there, behind him rose one of those forms he supposed to be dead.

His actions were noiseless, and he held in his hand a revolver.

Nearer and nearer he crept, until the muzzle almost touched the doctor's neck.

His belt of arms did not lie within his reach, and he had no suspicion of harm.

"Now to see my gold!" he said, in a pompous tone, and he rose as he spoke, to turn and gaze into the muzzle of a revolver.

He nearly sprung back into the fire, but the man and his revolver quickly followed.

The doctor was as white-faced as the dead about him, his teeth chattered, his eyes rolled in frenzy, and he could utter no word.

But the man who now held him in his power spoke, and what he said was straight to the point:

"You played a lone hand, Doc, but the game was one two could play at, and so I chipped in just for sociability's sake."

CHAPTER LXI.

A COMPROMISE.

THE doctor was so thoroughly frightened that he had not the power of answering the words addressed to him by the man who had turned the tables so cleverly upon him.

So, after waiting for him to speak and receiving no reply, his persecutor said:

"You may not be able to talk, Doc, or draw a weapon, but you can hear, and you shall hear me."

"What caused me to suspect one I looked upon as such a great man, I do not know; but at the last minute I had a feeling come over me to doubt you."

"You know that I have been a drunkard, that I could never resist taking a drink, so I deserve a great deal of credit for my forbearance to-night."

"You gave me a most generous drink, and the fragrance of that liquor filled my nostrils and went to my heart."

"I could hardly resist quaffing the delicious draught, for I longed to do so."

"But the still small voice of warning bade me not do so, and I resisted."

"I tipped that tin cup up, but not a drop of it went between my lips."

"I shut my teeth firmly and the liquor rounded my mouth, yet did not enter it, not a drop."

"Then I saw you play ill and I laughed all to myself, for I saw your little game."

"So I tumbled over with pretended cramps, and—expired."

"Just think of that."

"But if I did not, all the others did, for they died from the deadly poison you put in that bottle of liquor."

"You are a very wonderful man to stand off there as you did and watch your victims die in untold agonies."

"I really admire you more than ever, I really begin to fairly love you."

"Thus regarding you, I wish to make terms with you, to come to a compromise."

"I am wounded, and not very strong, so you can help me."

"I will take you in on half-shares, only do not expect to gain the mastery of me again, for you cannot do so."

"I will carry your weapons, and you will have to do the work, for I am master now; your master."

"Now say, Doc, if you wish to compromise, or will you force me to kill you?"

During this long speech of Racket Rob, the

doctor had regained his wonted composure fully.

A smile had come upon his face, and he now said in his natural voice:

"My dear Robert, I have for you now an unbounded respect, and I will gladly make terms with you."

"I hated to kill you, too, but the truth was I had an idea that you were in with the boys against me, so I included you in my list of victims."

"Now I think we can work together, are necessary for each other's future success and happiness in this life."

"What is the compromise you wish to make?"

"That you serve me well for half a share of my gold."

"I accept with pleasure."

"Then I will place temptation out of your way by bundling up all these weapons together and putting them in a pack-saddle out of your reach."

"I shall also throw into the stream there your medicines, and then, with a revolver ready always to kill you, I will trust you."

"Thank you for your confidence, Robert; but now get those hateful weapons out of my sight; throw my medicines into the drink, and then let us gloat our eyes upon your gold."

Racket Rob did as he had said with the firearms and medicines, and then he went toward the pack-saddles, for he, too, was eager to feast his eyes upon the gold.

The doctor with his strong arms began to undo the pack-saddles, then a canvas bag was taken out and opened, and then, as the contents were emptied out upon a blanket, both men uttered a wild scream, like that of infuriated wild beasts.

Another sack was opened, and with like result.

The men glared at each other, unable to utter a word.

But suddenly upon their ears came the rapid clatter of hoofs, and into view around the mountain spur a number of horsemen dashed into sight.

"Muello and his Marauders!"

"We are lost!" cried Racket Rob, and the two men seemed rooted to the spot.

CHAPTER LXII.

THE DISCOVERY.

THE camp of the two men had not been yet seen by the coming horsemen, though they had been discovered by the doctor and Racket Rob.

Both had realized that they had been cleverly outwitted, cheated out of their prize, and they felt that it was Dashing Charlie who had done it.

"That accursed scout's not being with the gold-train is now explained," cried the doctor, in despair.

"Come, don't be a fool, but fly while we yet have time, for our horses are there, and we can escape out of sight before the Marauders reach this camp," said Racket Rob.

This brought the doctor to his senses, and he ran like a deer down the slope, followed by his fellow villain.

Their horses were quickly saddled, and, springing upon their backs, they dashed away into the timber several minutes before the Marauders had reached their camp.

The Marauders were following the trail of the gold-train, and they were led by their chief.

He had struck the trail of Dandy Nick's men, had come upon the camp where the men lay dead, saw the other trail coming in there, supposed the gold-train had been captured, and pressed on to take the precious metal away from the captors.

He had no idea of coming upon the camp so soon, and was almost in the midst of the horses before he discovered them.

Revolvers were whipped out, a warning cry was given, and the Mountain Marauders were ready for a fight.

But no one fired upon them, and then they discovered that the forms they saw were men, not sleeping, but cold in death.

"What does this mean?" cried the chief.

The men could not answer his question, and so he sought to solve the mystery for himself.

"I think I understand it."

"The men with the gold-train fought for the treasure, and others came on and got it."

"Those others were miners, who sought to head off the gold, for here are faces I recognize."

"But what has happened to them?"

"They bear no wounds, chief."

"Then there has been foul play of another kind—Ha! there are the pack-mules, yes, and there are the pack-saddles of gold!"

A yell broke from the lips of the outlaws at this discovery, and all made a rush for the pack-saddles, ranged in a perfect circle around a tree.

They saw the blanket containing rocks, and the two empty bags.

They then tore open the other bags, one by one.

"Rocks!"

All of the bags soon lay empty upon the

ground, and the blanket was piled high with rocks.

Such a howl of disappointment, rage and amazement as went up then from every lip was never heard in those wilds before.

The chief, as well as his men, was maddened, nearly frenzied with rage.

It was some time before they could become calm enough to talk it over.

At last they arrived at a very close guess of the situation, and believing that those who had murdered the others had retired upon finding what they had sinned so deeply to gain, they made no effort to follow them.

The first to regain his composure, the chief soon decided upon a plan of action.

He would send two of his men back to his band with the horses, pack-mules and traps, while he with six others would strike for a lower trail and continue the search for the golden treasure.

"This is the work of Dashing Charlie," said the chief. "He played a bold and clever ruse and deceived all of us, for he is now going toward Texas with that treasure."

"I will cross every trail and strike his, for he cannot, great as he is, cover it up."

"He has not a large force, I am sure; but, large or small, I shall follow him and fight for that gold."

"Oh! that I should be so deceived, so out-generaled by that man whom I hate so bitterly and have such cause to fear."

"But we will meet yet, meet on this trail and measure strength over the gold I covet so, the gold that has cost so many lives, been such a curse to many."

"Now, men, get to work, for we must be on the trail!"

The men promptly obeyed their master, and two of the number were detached to carry the horses and mules captured back to the main portion of the band.

Having had a short rest, Muello started on the trail, going back the way he had come, until he reached the trail he had left on following the doctor's party.

Along this they went, turning to the left and pressing on late into the night when they reached the river.

Here they went into camp for the remainder of the night, for near them the three trails centered at the river ford.

"To-morrow will tell the story whether they have passed or not," said the chief, as he threw himself upon his blanket to sleep.

With the coming of light he arose, and springing upon his horse, while his men prepared breakfast, rode down to the ford.

He was gone about half an hour, and when he returned, his face was radiant, while he said:

"They have crossed, men, and only last night, just before our arrival here."

"Within half an hour we will be upon their trail, and the gold shall be ours."

CHAPTER LXIII.

THE COVETED GOLD.

WITH Hunter Dave warning Muello, the Mexican, of what was being done with the gold, as he supposed, the Marauders of the Mines on the trail of the party who did not have it, Dr Quick adding crime to crime to get possession of the coveted treasure, which the supposed guards had fought among themselves to capture, the real train of pack-mules bearing old Matt Markham's fortune was going serenely along on its way under the guidance of Dashing Charlie, who knew a secret way in which he could get through the mountains, thus avoiding any of the sentinels of the outlaw chief that might be on the watch for them.

This path was not suspected by any one, but Dashing Charlie had seen that it was possible to carry horses that way.

He had therefore gotten among his purchases at the store in the camps a block and tackle, with plenty of rope that would be useful.

So when he led the way from the trail, just at nightfall, and turned up this path over the range, Rifle Ben called out:

"Hold on, Dashing Charlie, this path leads only to the top of the range, when you have got to go plumb among the Marauders."

"I can get over, Rifle Ben, without going up or down the range trail" was the confident response.

"Have you wings?"

"Not exactly."

"It can't be done then, for there is a cliff, or bluff, for miles, running from fifty to a hundred feet in height, and a man can only get down it in places."

"I know it well, Rifle Ben, but we will go over all the same."

Rifle Ben shook his head dubiously.

He had good confidence in Dashing Charlie, but this time he considered him "away off."

"You are biting off more than you can chew, Dashing Charlie," said Rifle Ben.

As for Captain Markham, he said not a word, such great confidence had he in the scout's ability to extricate himself from dangers and predicaments.

The top of the range was reached, but instead

of turning to the right or left, Dashing Charlie crossed the trail and headed for the bluff, the others following him in Indian file, and with more or less confidence in his ability to be successful or fail.

At last Dashing Charlie came out upon the bluff, just where several large pine trees grew near it in the valley below, their tops rising some twenty or thirty feet above.

One of these had been struck by lightning, and the torn limbs stuck up in the air not fifteen feet from the cliff.

"Now how can anything but a bird get down there, Charlie?" said Rifle Ben, half provoked at what he considered the stubbornness of the scout.

"I'll show you that we are birds, Ben," was the laughing reply.

"Now, pard," he added, "Get out those two lanterns and that block and tackle from the pack on the gray mule."

Taking his lariat he cast it over one of the limbs of the pine tree and several drew hard upon it to see that it was fast.

Then he asked for a saw from the pack and the ropes, and told Ben to saw several stout saplings for him some ten and fifteen feet in length.

This was done and Dashing Charlie swung out on the lariat, gaining a footing in the tree.

He carried a rope end with him, and one of the men also swinging out to a lodging in the tree, they climbed upward some twenty feet, drew the saplings up after them and made them secure in the crotches of the limbs.

This done the block and tackle were drawn up and made fast.

The next thing was to get from a pack a leather harness the scout had made while at the cabin waiting, and into this half-a-dozen pack-saddles were placed and lowered.

The rest of the things went next time along with a man, and ropes were connected to steady the load from below and also from the cliff.

Then the smallest horse of the lot was put into the harness and lowered slowly, the man below with one on the cliff steady him the while.

One by one they went over, all being blindfolded except the roan stallion of Dashing Charlie who took matters as coolly as did his master.

Then the scout swung out into the tree again, unfastened the block and tackle and lowered himself by a rope doubled over a limb to the valley below.

In less than two hours the work had been done, a ride of twenty miles saved, and the party were on their way to the river ford by the southern trail.

By avoiding certain dangerous localities in flanking them, the gold-carriers were delayed considerably.

But the ford was reached the following night, and after crossing, the party went into camp for a few hours.

It was here that Dashing Charlie was to leave them, feeling sure that they had eluded the Mountain Marauders and were comparatively safe, as in a couple of days more they would reach Cliff Canyons where Mustang Walter and his cowboys would be awaiting them.

"I give in, Dashing Charlie, every time now, for you know it all, you know it all," Rifle Ben had said, admiringly, as they sat down to supper that night around the camp-fire.

"I thank you, Rifle Ben; but I have very much to learn—Oh! did you hear that?"

All listened, but no one seemed to catch any sound away from camp.

"There is a horse coming along the trail at a gallop.

"I will head him off."

And Dashing Charlie went rapidly to the bottom of the hill along which ran the trail leading southward.

He had just time to take position behind a tree when a horseman came along and halted quickly at the stern command:

"Draw rein, stranger, and say who and what you are!"

CHAPTER LXIV.

ON THE GOLD CARRIERS' TRACK.

THE horseman who came to such a sudden halt, at the stern command of Dashing Charlie, called out in response to the challenge:

"All O. K., Dashing Charlie. I halt every time when you say the word."

"Dandy Nick!"

"Every time."

"Come to camp and tell us what has happened."

"I was on your trail, Dashing Charlie, to see if I could not be of some service to your outfit," and as the young miner spoke they reached the camp-fire.

"Dandy Nick!" cried Rifle Ben, in surprise.

"It's me, and no mistake, pard."

"Where is your outfit?"

"Gone to everlasting, amen."

"What do you mean?"

"Wiped out, chips handed in, and grave fruit."

"Come, Dandy Nick, tell us what has happened!" said Dashing Charlie.

"I'll tell you as soon as I can, and talking makes me hungry, seeing as I levanted without any food."

"You see, it did not take me long to discover that those men with me meant to get a fortune, if the pack-saddles held it, and I was to be done away with and the gold divided.

"I played 'possum, to catch them, went to my blankets, left them and got my horse out of the corral, and—"

"Left the outfit?"

"Not until I saw them fill my blankets full of holes, then fight a revolver duel among themselves, and, when Kansas alone survived, suddenly a volley came, and the outlaws rushed in, or I suppose they were the Marauders, for I did not wait to see."

"There were seven or eight of them, and I levanted, leaving them my dead friends, the mules, rocks, and the outfit entire."

"You were wise."

"I have a great head, Dashing Charlie, for looking out for Number One."

"I concluded, as my gang was wiped out, and I have shed no tears over the sad occurrence thus far, that I would come on after you and join you all, while I thought it best to report what had happened."

"The mules I would have saved, had not the outlaws chipped in."

"Now I am astray, and to let."

For some time they talked over the affair, as told by Dandy Nick, and it was decided to push right on as fast as possible, as the outlaws would surely follow on after the gold-carriers when they discovered how they had been outwitted by the rock-carriers.

Dandy Nick was gladly taken on with the outfit, by Captain Markham, while Dashing Charlie said that he must return, and would be glad if a man would go with him as far as the ford, for then it could be seen if the outlaws were following the gold-carriers, and the courier could give them warning of their coming.

This was considered the best course to pursue, and before leaving, Dashing Charlie walked apart with Captain Markham and said:

"I feel that you can take Dandy Nick and Rifle Ben wholly into your confidence, so if the courier overtakes you with the information that the outlaws are pursuing, do you three seek a hiding-place for that gold, as it will be easy to come back with your cowboys and get it."

"I will do as you suggest, Charlie, for I will take no chances."

"Without the gold to retard us, we can escape the outlaws or beat them off."

"I am glad that you proposed it."

"Now, my good friend, I must say farewell to you, and were you my brother I could not regard you with more affection."

"You have done everything for me, and I would return it if you would only allow it; but you refuse to take anything."

"Except what you paid me, sir, on your brother's account—that most liberally recompensed me, and I will take no more."

"Well, if the world goes hard with you, remember that you have a home with me and mine."

"Somehow I have a feeling that we will never meet again, and should we not do so, remember, my friend, that you have my deepest gratitude to the last—now good-by."

Thus they parted, Dashing Charlie and Richard Markham, who had so strangely met.

Dandy Nick had volunteered to go back with Dashing Charlie to the ford, and as he was given a fresh horse, farewells were said and the two turned back on the trail while the gold-carriers pushed rapidly on their way southward.

Camping for the remainder of the night near the ford the two men had not gone to sleep when they heard the sounds of hoofs.

"There come the outlaws now, Dandy Nick, so saddle up and be ready while I go and reconnoiter," said Dashing Charlie, and he went away on foot.

In half an hour he came back and said:

"They are the outlaws, Dandy Nick, and they have gone into camp, perhaps for the night, so ride with all speed after the outfit and tell them to push on for their lives."

"Say to Captain Markham that he had best follow my advice about the gold, for then he will be able to fight or run."

"All right, Dashing Charlie."

"And also say that I will try and check the outlaws with a few shots, to detain them all I can."

"Alone?"

"Oh, yes."

"Go slow."

"My good horse can gallop away from their best runners, and I would like a close look at them."

"Not too close remember; but I am off, and luck to you."

With this Dandy Nick mounted and rode away after the gold-carriers, while Dashing Charlie took up a position where he could ambush the Marauders and also have good running space if crowded.

CHAPTER LXV.

OVERTAKEN.

BACK to the "Gold Outfit," as the men called the mule train of Captain Markham, went Dandy Nick.

The sun rose some time before he came in sight of them, fast as he had traveled.

He at once reported to Captain Markham and Rifle Ben what discovery had been made at the ford by Dashing Charlie, and made known what the scout had suggested regarding the gold.

"See here, captain, you and Rifle Ben take the mules and go on ahead, leaving me behind with the men."

"Two are enough to know the secret of where the gold is to be buried, and by putting a few stones in the packs the men won't suspect you have buried the gold, and it is just right that they should know nothing about it, for traitors are frequent in these parts."

"Now, Rifle Ben knows this country well, and he can show you where the gold can be hidden, and we can follow slowly and nobody be the wiser."

"Then, if the Marauders overtake us, and wipe us out, well and good."

This advice of Dandy Nick was considered by Rifle Ben the best thing to be done.

So Captain Markham and the guide pushed on with the pack-mules, leaving the men to follow slowly under Dandy Nick, presumably to check the pursuit of the Marauders.

The mule outfit was pushed rapidly on by Rifle Ben, who, at the ford of a small stream, turned into the water.

It was girt deep to the horses, but they were rushed along for a quart of a mile where the stream ran around a cliff of rocks.

Here the guide got off on the rocks, climbed up the face of the cliff, lariat in hand, and one by one drew up the pack-saddles of gold.

"I know this spot well, and there is a hole yonder in those bushes that will hold the gold, and a few stones thrown in will hide it thoroughly."

"I camped there once while hiding from Indians, and there is but one way to get upon that point of rocks, as you see, Captain Markham, and that is from the stream."

The gold was soon safely hidden, and the two men descended, sprung into their saddles, and led the mules back up the stream to the ford, leaving no sign that they had left the trail at any point.

Then they pressed on again very rapidly, for the men under Dandy Nick were not far away.

So they pushed on to a camp, and were later joined by the men, who had seen nothing of the outlaws.

After supper Dandy Nick rode back upon the trail.

He was anxious to discover if the outlaws were still pushing on.

He had every reason to believe that they were, for he knew well the determined nature of Muello, the Mexican.

With a quarter of a million dollars as a prize to be gained, there was no doubt but that the outlaw chief would move Heaven and earth, if in his power to do so, to get it.

That he felt he was on the right trail at last there was no doubt in the mind of Dandy Nick, for the persistent chief had pushed on to triumph in the end, as the past experience of the young miner had discovered for himself.

That Dashing Charlie had been able to more than check the outlaws at the ford Dandy Nick could not believe.

"Dashing Charlie can do a great deal, but he cannot check those outlaws on the trail of this gold."

"He was foolish to attempt it, and I only hope no harm has befallen him."

"Muello, the Mexican may have been checked for awhile, but not for a long while, certainly."

"Well, I am more than glad that Rifle Ben and Captain Markham got the gold ridden away, for, if the Mountain Marauders do overtake and attack us, we can, if hard-pressed, run for it and let them have the gold train with the pack-saddles full of rock."

"Hal hal hal! I would like a photograph of Muello, the Mexican, if he did capture the mules, and discover how he has been done for."

"Now I must go slow, for I don't wish to run upon any ambush, and I have several times had an idea of late that I was not long for this world."

"Now I have seen no trace of where Rifle Ben and Captain Markham left the trail with that gold, and if I cannot find their trail, then the outlaws cannot."

"They have hidden it away securely, that is certain, and it would be forever lost should those two who alone know the secret be killed."

"Now, good horse, we will go slow, for if the outlaws are coming on after the gold train, they cannot be far away now."

"I'll just take a look over the trail when I reach yonder ridge, for I can get a good view there."

Thus musing, he had ridden on for miles, and now he rode more rapidly toward the ridge ahead of him, for from that point he could see for several miles over the trail.

He had urged his horse to greater speed, for he didn't care to be seen, and was just about to halt and dismount and peer over along the trail, when a volley of half a dozen revolvers

shots were heard at short range, and Dandy Nick reeled, clutched at the air, and as his horse wheeled suddenly fell to the ground.

CHAPTER LXVI.

AMBUSHED AND AMBUSHERS.

THE chief was certainly hot upon the gold trail, for he had determined it should not slip through his hands.

The more he considered the situation, the more he felt assured of success.

He reviewed all that had occurred, and could not but give Dashing Charlie credit for having played a very bold and cunning game against him.

As he rode along, he mused aloud in this wise:

"Now I am not the only one who is hunting old Miner Markham's gold."

"He had a right to will it to whom he pleased, but I have a right to capture it if I can."

"He could not have gotten a more cunning and brave man to help him on his trail than is Dashing Charlie."

"He came near checking my advance back at the ford, too, for really I suppose he had more men to back him up, or that his whole party was there."

"If he had had his force then, I fear it would have kept the gold out of my hands, and that is an alternative that must not happen."

"He was bold indeed to stand in our track and open fire upon us when alone."

"Yes, and he got one of my men, and brought down a horse as well, and fortunate it was that I had extra animals."

"Well, there will come a day of reckoning between Dashing Charlie and the Mountain Marauders, if he prevents me from getting this gold, and bitter indeed shall the reckoning be for him."

"He has been the worst foe we have had, and I believe he is simply staying at the mining-camps to watch my men, and is not really a miner."

"He held too good a position at the fort as the chief of scouts to give it up at a chance of finding gold in Valley Camps, and though the soldiers think he has turned miner, I think Colonel Buckner and the scout understand each other."

"Now there is another riddle for me to solve, and that is as to who this Double is of the scout."

"At first I thought it might be one of my men, and yet that was soon proven to be impossible."

"He is an able counterfeiter, too, for I have seen some of his bogus money, and I would like to have him with me, for the bills he turns out will pass everywhere as good."

"Ah! an idea strikes me that, after all, this counterfeiter may be Dashing Charlie himself."

"Yes, it is possible that he has no Double, and may be playing the game for his own benefit."

"Why should he not be dishonest as well as the rest of us?"

"Yes, he may have left the fort for this purpose, instead of to mine, may have captured this counterfeit money and determined to use it for his own good."

"I shall see to this, if I do not get the gold, for if that falls into my hands, then I shall bid farewell to these scenes and dangers."

"Ah! my advance scout has made some discovery."

The discovery of a signal from a ridge ahead caused the outlaw chief to stop his musings and ride on rapidly.

As he ascended a ridge, the summit of which was covered with pines of small growth and rocks, he was met by one of his men who said:

"A horseman is approaching, chief."

"Is it the scout, Dashing Charlie, who ran away from us at the ford?"

"No, chief, I do not know him."

"Is he following the trail?"

"Yes, sir."

"Coming toward us?"

"Yes, chief."

"Then be ready to ambush him."

The chief accordingly gave an order to his men to dismount and take up positions among the rocks.

This they did, and they were soon in position with their weapons ready for use, all but one man who was left to hold the horses back down the ridge.

Peering from among the rocks, the outlaw leader saw a horseman slowly approaching the ridge.

He was nearly half a mile distant, and turning his glass upon him he recognized a miner he had before seen.

"Yes, he is the man who went as guide of the train that fooled me."

"All right he is my game now," and the chief smiled grimly in anticipation of soon having a victim.

Nearer and nearer the horseman came, and as he drew close to the base of the ridge he suddenly quickened his pace.

Up the hill he came at a canter, wholly un-

mindful of the ambush of death into which he was riding.

Nearer and nearer he drew until suddenly it flashed across the mind of the outlaw chief that he should have allowed the horseman to ride into a trap and capture, not kill, him, for the latter could be done at any time after he was a prisoner.

It was too late, though, then, for his men were scattered about among the rocks, and to call to them what he wished would but be to alarm the stranger also.

But he could only hope that the man would not be killed by the fire of the ambushed outlaws.

Another moment and a sharp report rung out from behind a rock nearest to the horseman.

Instantly he drew rein and his revolvers were in his hands to fight to the death, for he was wounded.

But other shots followed the first one and the horseman fell dead from his saddle, his body pierced by several bullets.

CHAPTER LXVII.

FAITHFUL UNTO DEATH.

THE horseman who had thus ridden upon his death, at the hands of the cruel Mountain Marauders, was, as the reader has doubtless discovered, the unfortunate young miner Dandy Nick.

He had not reached the ridge in time to save himself, though half an hour sooner he would have done so.

Could he have reached the summit of the rocks while the outlaws were off on the plain, as he was when they discovered him, then his own life would not have been the forfeit and perhaps the lives of others warned by his return, for the gold-carriers could have, in their turn, ambushed the Mountain Marauders.

But a cruel destiny led poor Dandy Nick into the death-trap.

The shot of the outlaw nearest to him had cut through his arm, and he had tried to stand and fight, expecting only one man to deal with.

But there came a discharge of another rifle, followed by others, and wounded desperately the young miner had fallen from his saddle, while his horse was caught with a lariat as he wheeled to dash away.

Though fatally wounded, as he knew himself to be, Dandy Nick did not yield to his foes, for he had one arm that he could raise, though the other lay helpless under him, the bone broken by a bullet.

Then, too, his body was pierced by a couple of bullets, another had cut through his neck, and his remaining arm also had a wound in it, though still he could use it.

He tried to stagger to his feet, but in vain, and so, lying prostrate as he was, he opened fire upon the foes that were rushing upon him.

But his eyes were dimmed by the anguish of death creeping over him, and his aim was untrue.

The chief had rushed upon him most eagerly, anxious to ask him before he died all that he would know of the gold-carriers.

He wrenched from his weakening arm the revolver, and asked:

"Now, sir, a word with you!"

"Be quick, then, for I am dying."

"A blind man could see that."

"Why did you kill me?"

"Because I decided when too late not to do so."

"You are Muello, the Mexican?"

"Yes."

"The outlaw chief of the Mountain Marauders?"

"I am."

"You are an infamous monster, and some day you will be hanged and I will be avenged."

"Silence! and hear me!"

"Well?"

"You were with Markham's gold-carriers?"

"I was."

"It was guided by Dashing Charlie?"

"It is."

"He is not with it now?"

"How do you know?"

"We have seen him."

"Ah! then you found him in your path at the ford?"

"Yes; and killed him."

"It is not so."

"How do you know?"

"Dashing Charlie is not to be killed by such as you."

"He has a nobler destiny than to be shot down by you and your cut-throats of the trail."

"You have just left the Gold Train?"

"A long way back."

"Where are they?"

"Safe."

"I know that they are not."

"Well, you press on and you'll find the same fate as mine."

"I have men enough to wipe them out."

"Not since Mustang Walter and his cowboys of the Markham Ranch have joined them."

"Great God! is this so?"

"Go and find out."

"I will."

"With my dying breath, I dare you do so."

"Well, I'll go, and I'll leave you here to die and then to fall a victim to the coyotes and buzzards, if they do not attack you before life leaves your body."

"They will have to hurry up, for I am almost gone."

"You may live an hour yet."

"If I thought so, I would ask you to do me a favor."

"What is that?"

"To send a bullet through my heart or brain, for the choice I leave to you, and put me out of the intense anguish I suffer."

"You are a plucky fellow, Dandy Nick, and I have half a mind to oblige you."

"It may be one act in your guilty life that deserves credit, if you will do so."

"I will not be guilty of one good act, so will leave you here to die alone, and for the coyotes to sing a requiem in your ears to soothe your last dying moments."

"You are even worse than I thought it possible for you to be, Muello, the Mexican, and, mark my words, when you come to die, and I believe you will be spared for the rags, you will think of this my dying hour, and regret it."

A harsh laugh was the only reply of the outlaw chief, who called to one of his men to rob the dying miner of all he had of value about him, and then, mounting his horse, rode away without another word.

His men leaped into their saddles, and, with a shuddering glance at the dying miner, followed their terrible leader.

But one man hesitated, halted, and then dismounted.

He hitched his horse and ran back among the rocks to where the dying miner lay, and taking his canteen, handed it to him.

"It is liquor, pard, good brandy, and may kill the pain a little—take it, for you are more than welcome."

"God bless you, my friend. Give me one swallow, that is all."

"Won't you take more?"

"No—good-by, and God bless you, for you at least have a heart."

And the outlaw hastened on after his comrades, the last words of the dying man ringing in his ears.

As he glanced back from the plain he saw the form half-rise and fall back, and he knew that Dandy Nick was out of all pain—that death had ended his sufferings.

In the mean time, the chief had ridden slowly along the trail after the gold-carriers.

What Dandy Nick had told him had worried him greatly, for if Captain Markham had been joined by Mustang Walter and his cowboys, then he would surely stand no chance of capturing the treasure, to get which he had sinned so deeply.

At last the thought came to him that it could not be, that the cowboys had not come that far to meet the Gold Train, though they might do so further on, and nearer the ranch.

The more he thought it over the more convinced he was that Dandy Nick was only trying to frighten him back, so as to save the gold.

He had admired the pluck of the dying miner immensely, and yet this was all, for in his heart, callous as it was, there was not an atom of mercy or pity for him or any one.

"I was a fool to believe him, and I have lost valuable time by doing so, for it has delayed me."

Then, raising his voice, he called out:

"Come on, men, for that Gold Train is not far ahead of us, and we must have it!"

And then the ambushers of poor Dandy Nick rode rapidly, feeling assured that they were close upon the gold-carriers, who, with Dandy Nick out between them and danger, felt no anxiety, and so the tired men had thrown themselves down to rest.

After a ride of some miles the glimmer of the camp-fires of the gold carriers caught the eyes of the pursuing outlaws, and with a yell they dashed into the camp of those whom they had pursued so relentlessly.

Muello knew this time there was no mistake, for he knew the horseman at the ford who had dropped one of his men from his saddle with a rifle shot was Dashing Charlie, and Dandy Nick had just left their camp, so there was no mistake this time he was sure.

The tracks of Dashing Charlie showed the chief that he had come back on the trail, so he had left the gold-carriers, as he had believed, in safety far along on their way.

"Yes, there is no mistake this time," he muttered.

"Show no mercy, men!" shouted Muello, the Mexican, and as far as lay in their power the outlaws were determined to obey their savage chief.

CHAPTER LXVIII.

A FATAL WOUND.

TEXAS CHARLIE, the courier, carried his letter in safety to the Markham Ranch and gave it to Beatrice, the rancher's daughter.

The result was that several hours later a dozen cowboys set off for the rendezvous at Cliff Canyon, and at their head rode Mustang Walter.

But these were not all, for Texas Charlie returned with them, while there went along none other than Beatrice Markham.

No one could dissuade her from doing so, and everything was accordingly done to make her comfortable upon the journey.

"I am impelled to go, Mustang Walter, from a presentiment I have had that I will never see my father again alive," she had said.

The cowboys pressed as rapidly on as they thought it proper, with Beatrice along, and in several days arrived at the appointed rendezvous.

No one was there to meet them, but Texas Charlie said that it was too soon to expect them.

As a couple of days passed and they did not arrive, Beatrice urged Texas Charlie to go on with several of the men and see if aught could be found of the gold-carriers, while she remained in camp with Mustang Walter and the rest of the men as a guard.

Upon the evening of the third day Texas Charlie was seen coming.

A glance was sufficient to show something had happened, for they were dismounted, their horses being led, while they were bearing a burden between them.

"My poor father! you are wounded," and Beatrice knelt by her father's side.

"If I can get home I think all will be well," was the faint reply.

At once they started upon the return, the gallant cowboys dividing their time in carrying the wounded ranchero, while one of the men was sent after the ranch ambulance to come and meet them.

It was a journey of a week, but at last the ambulance was met, and the wounded ranchero soon after found himself in his own home.

His story was then told, for he rallied quickly, of how the camp had been attacked by Muello and his outlaw band, and his guide, Rifle Ben, had fallen at the first fire.

Others had been shot down, some escaping, and he had been wounded but managed to get away in the darkness.

He had ridden on until able to ride no further, and then had been overtaken the next day by the Marauders who had discovered the secret of the gold being hidden before the camp had been attacked.

Refusing to tell where it was he had been shot again and left for dead, and there remained until found by Texas Charlie and his men.

Such was his story, and as Beatrice heard it she began to feel that her father could never recover.

At his request she wrote a letter to Colonel Buckner of Fort Blank, asking him to keep his promise and become her guardian, if her father should die.

Back came the answer in time, that she should be as his own daughter.

But it came too late for the dying ranchero to hear it, for he had passed away one night as gently as falling asleep, and Beatrice was alone in the world.

Again she wrote to Colonel Buckner, and a couple of months after her father's death, Lieutenant Fred Gibbs with a cavalry escort arrived at Markham Ranch, and he had orders to conduct her to her new home at Fort Blank, for an affectionate letter from Colonel Buckner, brought by the young officer, told her that she would be very dear to her new-found kindred.

As soon as Beatrice could settle up the affairs at the ranch, which was left under the charge of Mustang Walter, she started for Fort Blank, where, after many adventures on the trail, she arrived in safety to find the warmest of welcome awaiting her from all.

She soon learned to love her new-found uncle most dearly, and more, she found that the lieutenant, whom she first regarded as a friend, then as a cousin, had become dearer to her than all else in the world, and what was better still, Fred Gibbs held the same deep regard for her, and which could, and did, end but in one way—a wedding at Fort Blank, to the great sorrow of the many young officers who had also fallen in love with the beautiful girl, who possessed, in addition to her beauty and noble nature, the fortune in gold which had been left her by Matt Markham the miner, and eventually given to her through the exertions of Colonel Buckner who sent Dashing Charlie to hunt up the treasure which had cost so many lives to hold possession of.

CHAPTER LXIX.

CONCLUSION.

AFTER his brush with the outlaws at the ford, when they were made to feel his deadly aim at long range, Dashing Charlie outran their best horses readily, with his splendid roan and making a flank movement came around to the mountain trail again leading to the Valley Camps.

He took up his quarters in the cavern first occupied by Matt Markham, and made himself comfortable there, for he had a duty to perform which was kept a secret from all saving Colonel Buckner at the fort, where Dashing Charlie held the position of scout.

This duty which he had been sent upon was to

hunt down a band of counterfeiters who were supposed to have their retreat in some of the mining-camps, and were flooding the country with bogus bank-notes by disposing of them among the miners.

It was a long and difficult trail to follow, but Dashing Charlie played the detective well, and at last ran the counterfeiters to their den.

To his amazement he discovered in the chief counterfeiter a man whose features and build were such that he could readily make up so as to resemble him as closely as a twin brother.

And this was the man who had impersonated Dashing Charlie so well as to make old Matt Markham, the miner, believe his story that he had lost his papers given him and returned for others.

Well were it for the miner, and for his beautiful heiress, Beatrice, that he did not give another letter to the pretended scout, or tell him any secret that would give him a clew of how to get possession of the gold he had worked so long and hard to get.

The trail after the counterfeiter, his Double, was a hard road to travel, like it is said the "Road to Jordan" is; but Dashing Charlie, like a hound on the scent, never gave it up, and in the end had the satisfaction and revenge of seeing Graydon Donaldson, as his Double was known, brought to the end he so richly deserved.

Nor was this the only satisfaction that the scout enjoyed, for while engaged in trailing the counterfeiter, who had cast his destinies with Muello the Mexican, Dashing Charlie tracked the Mountain Marauders to their den, and became the rescuer of Lieutenant Fred Gibbs, who had been taken prisoner by Muello the Mexican, who held him in the belief that he knew where the Markham gold was hidden and that he could force from him the secret, under fear of being put to death by torture.

Though Muello the Mexican, and several of his men, escaped death and capture at the hands of the soldiers led to attack their camps, the balance of the band were utterly wiped out of existence, the Marauders of the Mountains being remembered only as a terror of past days.

Though the mysterious masked chief still remained a mystery to those who had known and dreaded him, the gallant scout who had driven him from the trails of New Mexico won great praise, and by this deed, added to many others, has written his name on the page of history as one of the famous Heroes of the Plains.

THE END.

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